

Secretly, Silently

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Secretly, Silently

by [bad_dictionary](#)

Summary

Hermione Granger is an Omega witch, and she's determined to keep it a secret.

But when her suppressants suddenly stop working and she causes a frenzy at the Ministry, hiding is no longer an option.

Faced with a breakthrough heat and provided an ultimatum by the Minister himself, Hermione is forced to choose an alpha to see her through the extremely vulnerable event and risk being mated against her will.

****noncon tag is not for dramione****

Chapter 1: Chapter One

Monday, December 15, 2003

Hermione entered the near-empty Ministry of Magic via floo sick to her stomach, her suede loafers sounding across the dark marble floors as she made her way to the lifts, shuffling her robes on her slender arm. Being a quarter to five there was nearly an entire hour before the Ministry was officially deemed open, and yet this was ritual to her—the silent, crowd-less start to her morning.

Approaching one of the several gold grates set into the ornate stone walls, she pressed the button to summon the lift. As she waited she attempted to ignore the ache she felt remaining in her body from her recent heat. She had chosen to forgo her usual recovery and prematurely return to work due to the winter holiday beginning when she would normally return from one of her medical absences. But already she debated turning for home. One more day of rest would benefit her more than an early start to her caseload.

The arrival of the lift startled her from her thoughts of leaving.

Stepping onto the rickety enchanted box, she selected *R09* from the panel, seeing the button light up beneath her finger. The cage at the front of the lift rolled shut and she reached up, grabbing one of the high-up handles dangling from the ceiling just in time to keep her balance as the lift jerked to life and began the descent to her department.

As the only stop, she arrived at Archives and Record Storage quickly, stepping into the marble foyer before descending the three steps to the wooden expanse of the archives—stacks upon stacks of literature, case files, and artifacts stretching out before her.

Hermione hung a right and followed the widest of all the corridors back to the offices, quietly finding her way to hers and unwarding the door to let herself inside. Setting her robes and overstuffed satchel down on her cluttered desk she let out a long, tired sigh and immediately retreated back the way she came in search of the refreshment trolley.

It didn't take her long to curl her hands around a generous mug of hot tea, the warmth seeping into her clammy post-heat skin as she tucked it close to her chest and puttered through the archive to the section of references she would need for her ongoing assignments—a charmed book cart following her.

The aspirations she had as a girl for a political career, then one advocating for various magical creatures, and possibly even one as a professor at her beloved Hogwarts were utterly ruined when she presented just two weeks following her eighteenth birthday as an omega witch.

Being muggleborn, designations had only been briefly explained to her during her sixth year by Minerva McGonagall—a beta witch—and she did not fully understand the implications nor the seriousness of the topic until much later.

To her knowledge at the time, whatever designations were only warranted a thirty-minute conversation in her Head of House's office delivered with equal awkwardness as the mandatory sexual education speech in third year. Her mentor surmised after babbling at length that the presentation of a wix's designation left over eighty percent of their population unaffected—the statistic was enough to put off Hermione's desire for immediate research. Learning of an additional aspect to wizarding culture was interesting to her, of course, but she was preoccupied with thoughts of the impending war, her parents, Harry and Ron...

It wasn't until the summer following Dumbledore's death, barely weeks before their trio began the hunt for horcruxes, that Hermione had even bothered to seek supplemental reading on the subject—naively assuming that she would be a beta like most wix presented. In fact, she had herself so convinced she was a beta that she had ignored the initial symptoms of the omega designation cropping up.

When she finally admitted to herself the possibility of being wrong, a stolen hair, a gulp of polyjuice, and an extremely risky visit to a designation-specific healer in a small wizarding village confirmed her worst fears—she was no beta.

The months on the run with Harry and Ron following her birthday were uncomfortable to say the least, especially as she decided to hide the truth of what she was so as not to alert them of the additional danger, and to protect herself from any unintentional effects the knowledge might have on them.

It was only in December when her first heat symptoms began following a brief and nearly catastrophic visit to Godric's Hollow that she confessed the truth to Harry in tears, her body rebelling against the copious amounts of suppressants she'd home-brewed and choked down to keep her heat at bay.

He'd surprisingly admitted he had some suspicion of the fact after their weeks alone and held her through it without judgment, appearing impossibly immune to her wailing and keening and whimpering—not once crossing the boundary she had set that no matter what she asked of him they would not perform any sexual act.

Harry had always been one to sacrifice for others, to put them first. Because of this, she knew it killed him to witness the pain and need she was suffering in the absence of an alpha, and knew he felt helpless to watch. Still, he remained steadfast by her side through the entire episode, feeding and caring for her as she lost herself to the emerging omega portion of her magical identity.

The appreciation and love she felt for her best friend swelled as he came out of her five-day-long heat-induced daze cradled against him—vulnerable and disoriented. He comforted her and lovingly eased her out of the worst experience of her life up until that time.

When Ron returned to them half a week into her recovery from the ordeal, she knew Harry worried about her privacy, especially as she began to feel strangely wary of their ginger friend—avoiding being alone with him and his touch. The relationship between her and the

wizard was hardly what she would consider repaired after his betrayal as the months continued, but it seemed her hidden designation only widened the schism between them.

More time passed and she watched as both wizards matured in preparation for their own presentations. It was apparent to her that one or both might turn out to be an alpha based on their size alone—both grew several centimeters quickly, and bulked up, their shoulders widening and jaws sharpening.

The fear that came with those thoughts was enough to push her to brew the more severe of the pheromone-blocking potions and heat suppressants she had managed to find in her limited research—luckily they worked.

When Ron presented as an alpha in the week following his birthday, he barely spared her a second look and the relief she felt was palpable. In no world did she want a mating bond forced on her but it could happen in spite of any previous feelings, any agreement between them, or protestation—an alpha's inherent purpose was to find, claim, and breed an omega. And with the British Wizarding World's historical proportion of one omega to every five alphas, she had naught a hope to remain unclaimed forever. But her potions gave her time—time to choose, to make decisions on her own. It was all she could ask.

When indications of her next heat came she and Harry devised a plan to protect her from their alpha companion. They would prepare a second tent for her to isolate herself with claims of sickness. Harry would ward her inside without a wand, deliver food to her daily, and she would remain there until her heat was complete—alone. Because she had managed her first heat unassisted, she felt capable of doing so again even though it was extremely unpleasant. So, they laid the groundwork for her absence in the days of her pre-heat and Ron thought little of it when she finally did seclude herself.

It was an excruciating five days—an amplification of her first experience tenfold.

In the first hour she was groaning at the burn of it, her skin overly sensitive, her cunt clenching around nothing, desperate to be filled, thighs slippery with slick as she paced and held pressure on her cramping abdomen.

After three hours, she was beating against the wards, begging for Harry to let her out—for someone to touch her. During her last heat at least someone was there to hold her, to care for her—now she was alone. Utterly, heartbreakingly alone.

Six hours in, her fingers buried as deep inside as she could reach, stretching to relieve the pain splitting her open—the slim digits not nearly long or thick enough—she was fine with her Alpha being Ron if only to stop her agony.

She lost track of time after that, writhing on the ground in a puddle of sweat, slick, and tears. The worst part of it was that she could tell the suppressants were working, dulling it, and still it was unbearable.

When Harry came to let her out days later her lungs ached, her throat was raw from her sobs and screams, her clit swollen and red, her nipples bruised, and the rest of her oversensitive. She could hear his panic in his speaking to her, feel the roughness of material caressing her

naked body as he shrouded her in something and apparated them out of the tent to a nearby lake. He cleaned her gently in the cool water, summoning things from their camp as Ron slept oblivious to their schemes and Hermione's suffering.

After restoring her lucidity, washing and dressing her, Harry held her on the shore and helped her to eat and drink guiltily.

Neither of them expected spending the heat alone to nearly kill her. But it was the almost fatal outcome that led them to understand the role of an alpha in her life—the necessity of one. She was incapable of caring for herself in that state, incapable of meeting her biological and mental needs, unable to help herself. It was incredibly disheartening to learn—of course, she had read about it briefly in the literature she was able to get her hands on, but to learn her future was suffering or dependence was... more than depressing.

The following week she was a shell of herself, the omega in her cowering, neglected, and abused. Even though it was her choice to spend her heat alone, living through it had done undue damage.

At Harry's insistence, on day one of her next heat cycle, she took her pheromone blocker like she was meant to, dulling her omega traits to keep up the charade for Ron. She hardly saw the reason to... she would need an alpha and he was convenient. It would make sense to allow it to happen.

Harry protested for her and she remained hidden in plain sight.

Despite Ron's inability to sniff her out with the blockers' interference, he had taken some interest in her—or at least noticed Harry's newfound dedication to her. Her best friend had been on edge ever since finding her half-dead following her heat and began to hover, always keeping an eye on her, fawning over her to assure her wellbeing, completing simple tasks for her... it was sweet and, in complete honesty, necessary at the time.

But during a fight Ron picked about the attention paid to her and their slowing process on the horcrux front—unbeknownst to him because of her extended recovery—Harry slipped up and invoked the taboo on Voldemort's name. Before they could run they had been captured by snatchers and hauled away against their will.

Like prizes, they were presented to the Malfoy family, the eyes of the disgraced lord raking over each of them—scrutinizing them.

Hermione had gotten lucky and landed a stinging jinx to Harry's face in the forest where they'd been taken, protecting his identity for as long as the spell and its effects endured investigation—which she couldn't expect to be forever. She knew that any alpha who had met him previously should have been capable of scenting his identity—any of their identities—the moment they entered the drawing room, and she could smell at least one among them. Weakened by her blockers, she was unable to identify who exactly belonged to the designation, but as they were each interrogated no one in attendance spoke out against them.

Being discovered, however, became the least of her worries the moment one of the former Black witches spotted the Sword of Gryffindor among their belongings.

When Ron had returned to them just after the new year and her first heat, the sword came in tow. He and Harry had managed to then destroy the locket horcrux they carried with them—the only horcrux they'd managed to uncover in their hunting.

The reaction to seeing the Hogwarts founder's artifact with them was enough indication something was amiss. But before Hermione could begin piecing things together she was torn away from her companions who screamed and fought in her defense, then faced by an agitated beta witch, a wand raised against her.

Hermione found after the spasms racked her body the third time that the torture inflicted upon her by Bellatrix Lestrange as she lay prone on the tiled floors of Malfoy Manor was similar to that of her heat. The magic burned through her, white-hot, lighting her nerves on fire, tensing her muscles to the point her bones threatened to snap on their own, all sense and logic and thought stolen away until she was consumed by the pain.

But in a strange way, the Cruciartus curse felt more tolerable—because at least there was relief when the spell ended.

That was not to say it was not painful—it was extremely so. Wails and whimpers were freed from her lips, bile burning at the back of her throat as she convulsed and battered against the ground, her eyes rolled into the back of her head as she lost entire lungfuls of air screaming.

The sounds she made had a strange effect on one in attendance she learned from Harry when she came to days later at Shell Cottage.

Draco Malfoy. It was he who finally put an end to her torture when she forced his premature presentation as an alpha.

Somehow he incapacitated his mad aunt, the snatchers, Fenrir Greyback, and his own parents before stealing her away deeper into the manor. There was some time lost then, but a half hour after her screams stopped she was relinquished to Harry, and the six of them—Luna Lovegood, the goblin Griphook, and Garrick Ollivander from the dungeons as well as their trio—were allowed to escape by their classmate.

In the aftermath of the war, it was revealed Lord and Lady Malfoy took full responsibility for the incident, bearing the brunt of the punishment from their ruthless leader—especially considering Voldemort's propaganda advertised excessive leniency for alpha wizards. How they got away from the wizard fully intact Hermione never learned, but at the Malfoy family's trials, she decided to speak on their behalf to repay the debt she owed and hopefully entice them to keep her designation to themselves.

They had.

Years later now, only seven living people knew of the truth: Lord and Lady Malfoy, Draco Malfoy, Harry Potter, his bonded mate Theodore Nott-Potter, Luna Lovegood, and Hermione's elf Dally.

Her secluded research and historian role in the Archives and Record Storage Department helped her to keep it that way—as was her desire.

“Granger,” a low voice rumbled behind her and she jumped, spinning to find pale grey eyes assessing her from their handsome perch—Malfoy. He must have scented her when he arrived.

A year prior, after his ministry-mandated probation was up, the wizard had been appointed a research position in her department on the topics of law and precedence. The sentiment surrounding the position was that he would be employed by the ministry—something they could hardly refuse the Malfoy heir, even as a former Death Eater—but he would be unseen, unheard, and out of the way.

Rather quickly she discovered he too preferred the solitude their work provided, the hours he kept even more impressive than her own as he was regularly first to arrive and last to leave the department.

Funnily enough, the subject matter of their work rarely had them crossing paths professionally, yet Hermione saw quite a lot of him in the stacks, conference room, and the lifts—more so than any of her other coworkers.

“What are you doing here?” he inquires, appearing displeased as his jaw clenches.

“Working?” she says, glancing at the small book trolley she’d been setting references onto beside her mug of cooling tea before dashing her eyes back to him, the lingering effects of her heat making her acutely aware of everything about him.

Malfoy frowns, adjusting his hold on the winter robes draped over his muscled arm and the strap of his dragonhide satchel. “What I meant is, what are you doing back today?”

“Sorry?” she asks, still confused, her attention half-occupied by the broadness of his shoulders.

“You aren’t due back until the end of the week,” he tells her, his grey eyes still roving her. She knows the instant he notices she is without a bra beneath her silk dress—a decision made to relieve her still-sensitive nipples—as his pupils dilate, engulfing the grey of his iris.

“We’re on holiday next week,” she murmurs, becoming aroused by the way his gaze suddenly devours her, openly tracing her figure. “I have work to finish before the new year.”

He hums in the back of his throat—it’s nearly a growl and she can’t help but react, her fingers grabbing hold of her dress skirt at the thigh, her eyes drooping, her tender core throbbing.

The sound grows in volume and he stalks nearer.

Before she sends him into a rut—which can occur by proximity alone in the final thirty days of an omega’s heat cycle—she comes to her senses, forcing herself back several steps, holding her breath.

The trance she’d had him under breaks like an elastic band and he straightens up, shifting his attention away from her to collect himself.

Clearing his throat, he asks lowly, “You are well enough to be here?”

“Yes,” she murmurs, her stomach aflutter.

When they began to see more of each other, his inclination to look after her had been nearly as off-putting as the revelation of her designation years ago. Trying to relate the horrible boy she had known in school with the quiet, caring man Draco Malfoy was becoming proved to be a difficult feat. But with time she acclimated to his new temperament, remaining cautious but receptive to the attention. As an alpha—an especially fervid one—he couldn’t help himself, just like she couldn’t help but desire the favor he showed her. So she allowed him his concerns... like now.

Apparently unsatisfied, unconvinced, or unable to resist the biological impulse, he looks at her, warning her in a thick voice laced with his alpha tone, “*Do not* overexert yourself this week, Granger. Your needs come before everything else—including your work.”

Her thighs squeeze tightly together to combat the burn of her arousal.

“Do you understand?” His eyes darken.

An obedient nod shuffles her honey-brown curls on her shoulders.

Narrowing his eyes at her, he casts a wandless warming charm and when a small sigh of contentment escapes in her surprise he finally stalks away through the expanse of shelves, leaving her behind to savor his lingering alpha musk as it mingles with the scent of old parchment.

... ..

Draco departs the archives toward his office, heart thundering wildly in his chest. He was angry and horny and desperate to go back to the tantalizing omega witch and ensure her every need was met as she finished her heat cycle—something he knew was incomplete by her state of dress alone.

He fought his designation tooth and nail as he unwarded his office and closed himself inside, breathing in the stale air in large gulps to clear her from his system.

It was her scent—thin and sterile from the blockers, like metal and soap, and below that, well enough hidden only someone who knew her true scent could perceive, the faintest wisps of honey and ripe berries—that had alerted him to her presence in the department upon his arrival that morning. As intoxicating as he found it, the panic that accompanied knowing she wasn’t yet meant to be back from medical leave had him seeking her out as soon as the lift stopped.

Going to his desk drawer he riffled around the potions until finding one of the blockers he took to resist the temptation of her proximity—something he took daily when she was scheduled to be present at work and every other day during her leaves to maintain tolerance. He downed the bitter potion in two large gulps before slouching in his armchair, the heel of his palm digging into the front of his trousers to kill his arousal. He’d need to sequester

himself in his office for at least a half hour to let the potion settle in before venturing out again lest he bump into Granger.

Control was something he prided himself on around the witch, something he'd exercised not only since his employment for the ministry began, but since the day his alpha was called out to save the suffering omega in his home nearly six years ago.

Before presenting, the only thing holding him back from intervening in the witch's torture was his mother's punishing grip on his wrist, her nails embedded in his pale skin drawing blood in her concern of his acting out. A year prior to that moment he had stood by and done nothing during the death of Albus Dumbledore and he couldn't stomach remaining a bystander a second time, especially not to what was potentially the death of the most infuriatingly alive witch he'd ever met. But before he could muster the courage and nerve needed to rebel against his aunt, his alpha magic acted for him.

In complete honesty, he couldn't remember how exactly everything happened.

One moment the witch he'd known since eleven years old—the witch that bested him in every subject except potions, the witch who broke his nose when he was thirteen, the witch who rendered him speechless in a periwinkle dress at fourteen, the witch who in spite of everything asked after him when no one else noticed him wasting away at sixteen, the clever witch he secretly admired for years—was only a classmate to him, half-dead on the floor he'd taken his first steps on, and the next she was the center of his universe, cradled in his arms as the others in the room collapsed, incapacitated by rogue magic.

He remembered stealing away to somewhere safe in the manor, somewhere they wouldn't be found. He held the unconscious body of the witch in his lap—an omega he'd realized by then—his face tucked into her unblemished throat, scenting her to calm himself.

All he desired was to mark her, bond her, mate her—but he knew he couldn't. Not like that. Not against her will. The alpha emerging inside of him fought against the decision, protesting violently as Draco decided—knew beyond instinct—he had to give her back, he had to send her away so she would be safe. Safe from him. Safe from Voldemort. Safe from the others inhabiting his family estate.

And because his alpha magic was prematurely released, he had the final say over what was to happen, but he didn't know for how long.

Knowing his time was borrowed, Draco savored Granger—not just her omega—burying his fingers in her honey-brown curls, breathing in the hidden scent of her directly from the thin skin over her mating gland, magically healing her to the best of his ability, brushing gentle kisses to her soft, pink cheeks.

He didn't know how much time had passed but he felt his control slipping so he finally ventured back through the manor, remaining on guard until he reached the dungeons with her.

Peter Pettigrew, a rat-faced bastard he'd never cared for, was strangled at the foot of the stairs by his own silver hand. But the goblin-forged iron door remained locked at the foot of the

stairwell.

Curling the witch closer to his body, he had called quietly into the eerie darkness of the endless room, hearing those his aunt and father kept in the cell before he saw them.

Potter was the first to appear, Weasley after him reeking of alpha musk—Draco nearly gave into his alpha then and there, his grip on the omega witch in his arms tightening.

“Hermione!” They both cried in shock, racing to the bars of the dungeon cell.

The ginger began spouting off empty threats as Draco looked longingly down at Granger before glancing up at Potter. His rival’s green eyes shone with understanding.

Letting those in the cell out, Draco surrendered Granger to Potter and allowed them to escape, watching as a familiar elf appeared to take them away. The loss of Granger was debilitating, the moment she was out of reach he lost himself—so much so he didn’t notice those he’d incapacitated when presenting coming back to themselves.

As the group of his family’s prisoners began to disappear it was too late to stop the dagger his wicked aunt launched in their direction.

He agonized over the thought of that dagger finding a home in his omega and was sick with thoughts of it until he caught sight of her a month later during the final battle.

She was a formidable witch. Brilliant, and beautiful—something he could admit to himself even before learning of her designation. The additional dynamic between them only heightened his attraction to her, his draw to her, and his need to be around her.

Following the war, he hoped for the chance to speak with her again, to make up for his crimes against her. Nearly a year in Azkaban waiting for trial, then three on house arrest left him hopeless for a chance with her until he started at the ministry and found her not only in reach but still unmated.

Ever since he had been spending his time in the position initially meant to undermine him feeling like the luckiest bastard in Britain. He had access to the unmated omega he was in rapture with, was befriending her, caring for her, and she seemed completely content to allow his attention.

The only threat to him was whichever alpha she spent her heats with. A detail he was constantly aware of but increasingly less worried about—whoever they were had years to stake a claim over the omega and they had not. He didn’t expect this to suddenly change.

However, knowing Hermione Granger as the adult witch she’d become since the war, he knew no one could rush her. She was wary of people, especially alphas—which was another mark against him. This also meant that whoever helped her during heats may be playing the long game just as he was.

He let out a withering sigh, pressing his thumbs into his temples as he reassessed his plans for the day. Granger being back to work shifted his schedule about.

It was uncommon for alphas to wander down to their department as they generally chose more active professions for themselves, but Draco felt the need to remain where he could sense Granger on the off chance something happened and she needed him. Just as he would any other day she worked.

The only two exceptions, or perhaps allies, to this endeavor were Potter and his bonded mate Theodore Potter-Nott—who Draco had known since childhood but could hardly consider himself close with. Both alphas made the journey to the department quite regularly to spend lunch with Granger, even though Nott didn't work at the ministry.

When Draco began in the department it was a concern to him. In fact, he worried it was one of them—or both—who saw Granger through her heats. But then Potter paid him a visit.

They spent hours together, the first a stalemate between them before Draco finally conceded to *The Boy Who Lived*, the next discussing his various transgressions over the years, then the war, and finally Granger.

The Gryffindor wizard warned him against hurting the witch. The mere suggestion he might was enough to send Draco into a rage.

Following said rage came a handshake, an agreement that he would start on blockers, that he would respect Granger's boundaries and remain professional unless she initiated something more, that he wouldn't exert his power over her, and that he would keep her secrets—all of which felt almost too obvious to put to words. But their conversation had earned him Potter's trust—in turn, Nott's—and settled any doubts about their relationship to the omega witch Draco had.

She was important to them—family. But she wasn't theirs.

It was Potter he wrote a missive to now—a practice both partook in more than they would admit.

Granger is here. Did you know? - DM

... ..

The door to Hermione's office swings inward without warning and she yelps, grabbing for her wand before processing who the panting wizard at the threshold is. His green eyes search her.

"Harry," she sighs out a breath, setting her wand back beside her. "What on earth is the matter—"

"You're here," he heaves out, stepping into the office, the door shutting behind him.

"I—Harry, I'm fine," she assures him as he rounds her desk, turning her chair so he can better inspect her from where he kneels before her.

He takes her face in his warm palms, feeling her skin beneath the glamorous she'd erected that morning, discovering, to her dismay, that her temperature is still low. His displeasure is

palpable, “You are meant to be resting.”

“I feel fine,” she says to sate his worries.

The rumble deep in his chest tells her he doesn’t appreciate the fib, his hands moving to gently turn over her arms and reveal the scent glands near her pulse points. He leans down—careful not to touch—and takes a deep breath, frowning. “You took blockers.”

“Only a few days early, and a half dose. I’ll start the next round as planned—”

“It’s taking you longer and longer to recover from your heats the older you get, Hermione. This isn’t some small thing to mess about with—it’s your life, your health. You need to rest.”

“I’m fine, you saw me after—”

“I want the truth,” he demands, alpha tone resonating in the office, invading her will.

Whimpering slightly she shifts in her desk chair.

“How are you?” he asks more gently, hating to use her designation against her.

“Tired,” she whispers reluctantly, shifting again. “A bit sore.”

“And cold?”

She nods, looking away from him as he rubs his thumbs into her palms soothingly.

“Let’s sort you out then, yeah?” Harry brings her fingers to his lips, kissing them gently before standing.

He goes to the trunk placed to the right of the door and drags out a soft cardigan and a blanket for her, bringing them back to her desk. As she gets comfortable in them he goes to the breakfront just left of her desk and opens one of the lower cabinets to raid her stash of potions there. He finds one and brings it back to her.

“Just a minute, love,” he leaves her office, returning a minute later with a new mug of hot tea because he knows she still hates the taste of potions, even after taking them weekly for years.

She sighs, taking the pain potion in three gulps before drinking down the hot tea without care for the slight burn it leaves in its wake.

Harry pets the back her hair, dropping a kiss on her forehead before pocketing the empty vial. “Good girl.”

“Don’t patronize me,” she pouts.

“I would never,” he says, placing another loving kiss on her head.

Shutting her eyes she basks in the affection for a moment, letting it soothe her. But she knows he is not satisfied with the small changes, or her being at work for the week. “I need to be

here.”

He pushes. “Half days?”

“ *Harry.* ”

“You can send for me if you need me,” he says with a sigh.

“You are going to be late,” she tells him, checking the timepiece on the wall as he hovers at her side.

“Promise me.”

“Of course, I’ll send for you,” she tells him, rolling her eyes.

“Good.” He presses one last kiss to her head.

“Thank you, Harry,” she calls as he reaches the door.

““course, love.”

Chapter 2: Chapter Two

Wednesday, December 24, 2003

Snug between Theodore and Harry on one of the sofas in the cramped family room of the Burrow, Hermione sipped on a warm mug of cider delivered into her hands by her best friend while also exploring the plate of holiday treats in her lap provided by his bondmate. She was content between them, dwarfed by their large alpha bodies, and they were happy to play buffer for her in the bustle of the household of their surrogate wizarding family.

Molly and Arthur were in the kitchen, arguing over their youngest son and his scantily clad date for the evening—who had obviously thought when invited along for Ron's Christmas plans they would be celebrating the holiday not with his family, but rather *alone* in some dark corner of a wizarding club.

Bill and Fleur sat cuddled together in a nearby armchair, their young children playing on the floor near their feet. Bill's hand rested possessively over his veela wife's stomach, suggesting to Hermione that they may be expecting their third child in the near future.

Charlie wasn't to arrive for the holidays until the New Year which was a relief to Hermione. Dodging one unmated alpha on the visit was effort enough, two had previously wrecked her nerves for weeks following their extended proximity, and three, years past, had nearly sent her into subspace. However unintentional, she appreciated his conflicting plans.

Percy and his beta fiancée, Penelope Clearwater, had stayed for dinner and gifts before flooring off to a ministry associate's celebration. Since the war Percy had put great effort into his role in the Weasley family, going out of his way to be involved with them. She was sure he saw more of his brothers and sister than their parents nowadays.

George and Angelina had also excused themselves early into the evening—family gatherings took their toll on him in the absence of his partner in crime. His witch was good for him though. She had managed to revive parts of him they'd all assumed lost with Fred's passing.

Ron was somewhere upstairs snogging his beta witch. He had tried to act inconspicuous as he ushered her up the rebuilt stairs of the Burrow—which still creaked and groaned despite their young age—but every one of them knew what he was up to.

And Ginny, in overprotective alpha mode, followed closely after a heavily pregnant Luna who was puttering around the room carrying a tray of biscuits. Nearly a year prior Luna had chosen to go off her suppressants for the first time since she presented as an omega and allowed Ginny to bond with her, mating their magic.

They were a lovely couple, Hermione found, and it gave her hope for her inevitable bonding in the future. However, there was some discourse in the family surrounding the union, especially where Ginny was the youngest of the three alphas in the Weasley brood. Molly had much to say about it all up until Ginny threatened to never speak to the lot of them again if they didn't '*shut the bloody hell up*' as she so eloquently put it at the time.

Tensions abated but the youngest Weasley's relationship with her alpha brothers never recovered to Hermione's knowledge. Ron took the greatest issue with Ginny claiming Luna because of her being female—completely ignoring the unique duality of the alpha and omega designations. With their adaptable genitalia, everything was quite compatible between any pairing.

Thus, Luna's pregnancy.

Theodore and Harry spoke over Hermione's head, the larger of them with his arm draped behind her—the one bearing the scar of a Dark Mark. He'd received it not long before the war's end, just after turning eighteen and presenting as an alpha. But he'd not been party to the Death Eaters or their master long enough to garner a reputation, nor had he willingly participated in the violent acts those ultimately punished for their roles had a penchant for. So he'd been released from Azkaban following the war with only a year's probation—less of a punishment than most others.

In the year following his probation, he liquidated his family assets, moved into a muggle flat in London, founded a program for Pureblood education on muggles, reacquainted himself with the Auror department to aide in the hunt for rogue Death Eaters, and began to work on his charms mastery.

Now it had been four years on the straight and narrow—and three since he mated Harry, even though they were both alphas.

It was not as uncommon as she first thought for alphas to seek release with each other. Alpha physiology allowed them to safely knot one another like they were meant to an omega—relief that could not be similarly found with betas during ruts. And with so few prospective counterparts, it was only sensical to turn to each other for sexual relief.

That was how Theo and Harry first came together.

What started as sexual favors and coupling out of need quickly became more. They enjoyed each other, spent more time together than apart, and were thoroughly in love before either of them realized it.

In a stroke of luck, their designations found balance. Theodore was a dominant, yet calm and reasonable alpha and Harry had strong instincts to provide care but not exert control. Theirs was a match made by Merlin—or at least post-war peace.

Hermione's wariness of the new alpha in her life was soothed following Theo's admittance that he knew she was an omega for some time before bonding with Harry. He had smelt her pre-heat on Harry months earlier after her friend had helped stock their kitchen with Dally and secure Grimmauld for her heat. The knowledge that he had known about her and still chose Harry had endeared her to him quickly.

She now thought of the two alphas as her own in a way.

Not only were they both dedicated to protecting her and her secrets, but they also chose to care for her and fought their magical and biological need for her so she could maintain her

freedom as an unmated omega witch.

Harry, being the first to grant her this freedom the night of his eighteenth birthday when his hibernating designation presented itself near-violently at their quiet afterparty from the larger celebration at the Weasleys', was who she sought out in times of need.

At the time of his presentation, she had been living with him at 12 Grimmauld Place, an orphan of her own making, otherwise homeless, terrified of her future because of what she was. One moment they had been speaking with each other quietly in front of the fireplace, a plate of chocolate cake between them, and the next he was on top of her.

In her panic she stopped breathing, her eyes wide and fearful as he pinned her to the cushions spread about—but she didn't fight him. Her omega trembled with anticipation, desperate after three painful heats alone to be claimed, to be cared for, to be cherished. She decided in those long, stalemate moments that of any of the alphas she was acquainted with at the time, Harry would be the most agreeable... but it did not mean that she—Hermione Granger—desired that outcome.

Moments crept by as he panted overtop her, keeping her still beneath him with low rumbles deep in his chest. Finally, he began to pull himself away finger by finger, centimeter after centimeter until he was full across the room. Hermione remained frozen where he'd held her down until black spots clouded her vision.

“ *Breathe,* ” he commanded.

The lungful of air that met her was like nothing she'd ever experienced—relief from the oxygen and satisfaction in the omega part of herself for following the direction given to her. Slowly she sat up and looked over at her best friend. He was nearly vibrating with the effort it took to hold himself away.

“ *Stay there.* ”

“ *Yes, Alpha,* ” she purred in agreement, her omega traits nearly in complete control of her.

The growl that resonated through Grimmauld should have alerted the neighboring muggles.

Hermione had never experienced such elation as when she knew she was affecting Harry at that moment. She felt powerful, desirable, and wanted—it was the first time she was unafraid of her designation.

Then, without so much as a warning, Harry apparated away and did not come back for eight days.

Her feelings of elation quickly turned to feelings of dread and she learned the duality of being an omega—as deeply rewarding as it felt to please an alpha, it was just as agonizing to displease one.

When her best friend finally returned to Grimmauld she was a mess of nerves, having worried every moment since his abrupt departure. But he quickly drew her into a careful hug and assured her nothing she had done was wrong, that he was sorry to have made her wait.

He explained that he had taken a day to calm himself so he wouldn't forcibly bond her. Apparently the knowledge of her designation—not even the presence of her scent or magic due to her potions—was enough temptation to endanger her.

After collecting himself, he sought out specialists to help him suppress the desire to mate her—searching for something like her own pheromone blockers. His hurried research led him abroad when he discovered the British Wizarding World's views on alpha and omega rights were frustratingly archaic.

In Germany, he found what he needed. Alpha-specific blockers created by a pair of alpha and omega siblings who wanted to provide options to those like them. He joined their medical trial and after just two days on the potions, his inclinations toward the omega inventor had faded to dull interest. It was safe to return.

Prompted by his search, however, he and Hermione set out to learn British wizarding law about designations and soon realized they would need to declare themselves to the ministry—something neither had bothered to remember in McGonagall's brief overview of their magical futures in their sixth year.

The idea of making herself known, of exposing herself to such attention had nearly sent her into a nervous fit but Harry quickly devised a plan—which she altered once she had her wits about her—to conceal her designation until she was ready. They would have her recorded as a beta at the ministry, something inadvisable as it was illegal and punishable in an array of ways—time in Azkaban to name one.

But they would, and did.

Beyond the mandatory declaration, they discovered there were laws restricting unmated omegas from portions of society and negligent—at best—protections afforded them.

Unmated omegas were not permitted to hold employment of any kind, to seek higher education beyond their general schooling, they were responsible for the procurement and use of required, ministry-approved blockers and suppressants which reported horrible side-effects, any crimes committed against unmated omegas such as rape, violence, or forced mating enacted by someone of alpha designation would go unprosecuted, and unless claimed or under the management of their household, unmated omegas were at the mercy of the ministry for all legal and medical decision making.

The unjust rulings were obviously a ruse created to incentivize mating quickly and it set Hermione's blood boiling. The more she learned about her new role in the wizarding world, the more she felt discriminated against. She had fought a blood war as a child for the right to exist in the magical world, only to present as an omega and make herself an even bigger pariah as she passed into adulthood. Everything about her identity painted a target on her back. She felt the odds stacking against her and knew there was little she could do to turn them in her favor—she was cornered.

In the months following Harry's birthday, as the British wizarding world underwent major reforms in the hands of the new minister, former auror and Order member, Kingsley Shacklebolt, Hermione had hoped Kings might prompt or influence revisions to the designation legislation because of Voldemort's open and radical support of it—but he did not. Nearly every major or influential piece of legislation was put on the docket for review—including creature rights—but the designation laws.

The lack of attention and looming threat to her soon overwhelmed Hermione. Before long, she became too afraid of wix and potential attacks by alphas that she refused to leave the confines of Grimmauld place without Harry by her side.

Utterly helpless against her needs and anxieties, and understanding—both as an omega and a witch—how allowing an alpha to claim her would provide security and protection for her future, Hermione reassessed her hopes and wants for her life.

The October following her nineteenth birthday and fourth brutal heat unmated, she began wrapping her head around the idea of seeking an alpha out. She would need to vet them, have chaperoned visits—date them, even, which was an idea entirely foreign to her. Aside from a handful of crushes, some light snogging and petting with Viktor in fourth year, and Cormac McLaggen in sixth, Hermione was otherwise inexperienced, having been too caught up with Harry and the war to bother. Her lack of knowledge about what she might want in a partner was daunting.

Unbeknownst to her, at the same time as she was planning, Harry was concocting another solution to her omega dilemma in the form of a magical adoption of sorts.

As the newly appointed Lord Potter—after claiming the title from Gringotts Bank as an of-age wizard—he was able to tie her magic to the Potter line, and thus made himself responsible for her, removing any possible ministry sway over her person. His familial bonding of their magical lines and their reported lie to the ministry would protect her from all aspects of omega laws but the ones regarding her interactions with alphas.

Blissful, world-altering relief is how she would describe her feelings when the ceremony was finalized and she was shielded from the ministry's potential abuse.

Then in November of 1998, they traveled to Germany together to meet with the alpha and omega siblings Harry had been in league with following his presentation.

Adalrik, the potions master and alpha of the siblings, labored for hours to modify the blockers and suppressants she took daily to decrease the frequency they would be needed, lessen the toll they would take on her body over time, and help with the sense-dampening side effects.

His omega brother, Wilfred, taught her things to help conceal her designation like specific wardrobe items that wouldn't stimulate her, perfumes and scents to wear that could help mask her pheromones and blockers, spells to protect her delicate glands located on her wrists, neck, and inner thighs, and ways to ease her heats alone.

They spent weeks there, learning and aiding in the sibling's research, exchanging experiences, performing experiments, studying wards and designation magic, and using trial and error to learn her preferences and peculiarities in time for her fifth heat.

When her preheat set in, both alphas vacated the remote home where Hermione and Harry had been the brother's guests for weeks while Wilfrid stayed with Hermione to observe her—which turned out to be a minor disaster.

Knowing she did not belong to the home—that the space was not hers—was terrifying and she felt trapped and unsafe in her grueling days of bodily preparation. Wilfrid had tried to help her, keeping her company, instructing her to drink what she could stomach, bringing her different things to nest with when it became obvious she was desperate to... but her unsettled feelings never abated. And the feeling of being watched while so vulnerable was torture.

Hermione was almost relieved when her heat pains came because she knew she wouldn't remember the rest of it once the burning and aching and emptiness overwhelmed her enough to force her into subspace. But in spite of the discomfort of an audience, and even spent alone, it was by far the most bearable heat yet—the heat-specific toys provided to her had been able to trick and ease many of her omega instincts.

Wilfrid had much to say following his observation of her, providing a thorough analysis of his theories and recommendations once she had recovered her mind enough.

But they never meant to stay forever, so, exhausted and ready to be home, she and Harry returned to London, bidding their new friends farewell.

While she continued to recover from her disruptive biological cycle in the safety of Grimmauld, Harry sought to procure a house elf to act as a caregiver to her—one of their new friends' many suggestions. And although she protested the creature's servitude throughout the vetting process, she knew the elf would fill a necessary role in her life. So, upon Harry's argument that she would be a far kinder mistress to the elf than any other, Dally joined their small family.

With time, all of their changes fostered confidence and hope in Hermione and motivated her to regain some of her independence. Heats became more manageable and she could feel herself being happy once again.

In August of the following year, after taking her NEWTs in June with the graduating class at Hogwarts by allowance of the new Headmistress, Hermione began in the bowels of the Ministry at her current position.

It was her job to preserve, organize, and familiarize herself with various materials that found their way into the archives, researching and compiling reference indexes for any requests brought to her.

As time passed, she was offered transfers to politics by Kingsley and promotions within her department by Director Dekin—all of which she declined, satisfied with her work, with the ability to work at all in her condition, and with the many fascinating topics that found their

way across her desk. And she'd remained there in the four years since, content and hidden in plain sight.

Theo's milky white fingers played in Harry's soft curls at the base of the wizard's neck as she tucked closer into him, basking in the safety of their cradle. Despite her being seated between them, their knees were pressed together—her own legs draped over Harry's thigh, his hand resting possessively on her knee.

Just as she began to doze in the warmth of the home and her companions, the stairs creaked under the weight of Ron and his beta guest returning to the thrall of the festivities. The witch was red in the face and adjusting the twisted skirt of her skin-tight dress as Ron ushered her to sit on the empty loveseat across from their trio.

"Oh, no," the witch forced a smile, stepping toward the floo instead. "I really should be going, I—"

"Awe, come on. *Stay.*" Ron grinned, his alpha tone slipping out, setting off Hermione and Luna.

The alphas in the room all began to growl at their unmated equal as Ginny coaxed Luna from where she'd frozen in her turn about the room and Harry tightened his hold of Hermione's knee to calm her. In the excitement, the visiting beta witch Hermione is sure no one remembered the name of slipped away in a flash of green and the Weasley materfamilias made her appearance from the kitchen. "Just what is going on here!"

Ginny growled at her mother, guiding Luna to the remaining expanse beside Harry, knowing both of the mated alphas would help her to defend her pregnant mate if need arose.

"Julia was just—hey, where'd she go?" Ron asks turning around, looking for the beta.

Sometimes Hermione wondered how Ron ended up to be an alpha. It became obvious to her after interacting with both Harry and Theodore that with the amount of time she had spent with him, especially back before her heats were well managed, he should have uncovered her designation—even if it were by accident.

Additionally, he didn't seem to hold the same traits she yearned for. The wizard was not very caring, he wasn't a particularly strong leader, he was hardly possessive, his senses were weak, he lacked the awareness needed to properly understand a witch of any designation...

The only real trait he carried from the alpha designation was dominance—and it was cocky and toxic at the best of times.

"Let herself out," Bill frowns at his youngest brother, his witch remaining cradled in his lap as he leans down to collect their distraught son from the floor.

"Bloody—"

“Language young man!” Molly scolds the boy, smacking him with the dish towel tucked into her apron. “And how dare you bring a strange witch to *family* Christmas!”

“I wasn’t going to show up alone, mum,” the grown wizard groans.

“And what’s so wrong with coming alone?” Ginny growls, gesturing to Hermione in the process.

Wide-eyed and still thrumming from the unnecessary use of an alpha tone, Hermione looks between those arguing, beginning to shake her head to keep herself out of things.

“Yes! Why couldn’t you have brought Hermione!” Molly grins, seeming quite satisfied with herself for the suggestion—choosing to completely ignore the distance between Hermione and the youngest male Weasley these past years.

Gin rolls her eyes, “Not what I meant, mum—”

“I didn’t need to invite Hermione, mum. She was already coming—”

“But you could have asked she spend the evening with you so she wouldn’t invade upon poor Harry and Theodore.”

Flinching at the wording of Molly’s observation, Hermione stammers to find a reasonable defense that won’t out her designation. “I—”

“Hermione is always welcome to spend her time with my mate and I,” Harry growls out for her, his hand gliding from her knee to Theodore’s as he leans forward to block her physically from the conversation.

“Hermione is family, of course,” Molly waves, “But its indecent for her to put herself in the middle of your relationship—”

“That is not for you to say, Molly,” Harry grits out, body coiling as he stands.

Hermione’s head swims with the alpha pheromones saturating the room—Ron, Harry, Ginny, and Theo all becoming increasingly riled up by each other. She begins to pant, mind clouding as the scents pervade her senses, weighing her down, and edging her toward subspace. Luna makes a distressed sound beside her, equally affected as she sinks into the cushions.

Suffocating in the hostile climate, Hermione barely notices the vibrations of voices and magic, all but given into instinct to submit.

Without warning the doors and windows of the home are thrown open by magic, frigid winter air rushing in to abate the conflict. Arthur lowers his wand, speaking calmly, “Deep breaths now everyone.”

Hermione sucks in a shaky breath, blinking away the fog as Theodore takes an equally cleansing breath, letting his tension seep away. Harry’s posture relaxes where he is standing in front of them and he turns, checking on them. She nods, hand gripping Theodore’s tightly.

The doors and windows click shut again. “Well—”

“I think we’ll be calling it a night,” Theodore interrupts Arthur lowly, untucking himself from the sofa.

Harry rumbles his agreement, relieving Hermione of the plate of sweets in her possession before helping her to stand—their leaving meant she was on her way as well and she couldn’t claim she wasn’t relieved.

“No, not yet! The night’s still young,” Molly argues, quickly crossing the family room to take hold of Theodore’s hands, smiling up at him. “Please stay.”

Hermione knew the witch was missing her full house—the several empty bedrooms hardly used by her children readily prepared and proffered to them at each gathering the first of many clues.

“We should be on our way as well, mum,” Bill declares, standing with his witch in his arms, depositing her beside him to collect his daughter.

“There is room for you all to stay,” she offers again, making to block the floo as Arthur intercepts her and Harry goes to collect their robes from the entryway.

Ginny helps Luna to stand, her mood obviously still soured by her mother if the pheromones she continued to put off were any indication—thick enough to make Hermione dizzy again.

Wrapping an arm around her, Theo shot the younger alpha a warning look, his breathing shallow as he tried to stave off his instincts to challenge. Luna’s gentle nuzzling into the ginger eases the tension between the alphas as Harry returns with all of their robes, passing both Ginny’s and Luna’s to them. Theodore dutifully wraps Hermione in hers before donning his own as Molly continues to argue with her eldest about staying the night so she can watch her grandchildren open gifts in the morning.

“Sorry,” Ginny nods to Harry and Theodore as she curls Luna into her side.

Harry nods, taking up Hermione’s other side. “Happy Christmas.”

“Happy Yule,” Luna smiles prettily, letting her alpha escort her to the floo.

“Bye mum, dad!” Ginny calls as they step into the floo, not letting the matriarch of the Weasleys catch them before they disappear in green flames.

“Ginerva!” Molly calls, distracted from her conversation with Bill and Fleur as her youngest escapes.

“We cannot stay, Ar-tur, we are viziting ma soeur tomorrow,” the French witch tells Mr. Weasley as her husband curls her robes over her shoulders, their daughter on his hip.

“I know, my dear. You enjoy your visit with dear Gabrielle. Thank you for coming tonight.” Arthur smiles, caressing the back of his grandson’s head affectionately.

“It waz our pleazure,” Fleur smiles, swaddling her son close in her arms as Bill curls an arm around her, guiding her toward the door, Molly following them out.

Ron lurks around the kitchen behind his father, eyeing the three of them as they approach Arthur to make their goodbyes.

A blue flash of a portkey shines through the window indicating the eldest Weasley had departed with his wife and children. Molly’s appearance seconds later confirms it.

“Harry, you and Theodore will stay the night, won’t you? I have your room all made up,” she smiles, desperation shining in her eyes.

“I’m sorry, Molly, but we have to be going.” Harry lets the witch down, stepping forward to offer a hug goodbye.

She clings to him, hands trembling, “Can I not convince you?”

“We’ll be back for breakfast and gifts in the morning, Molly, but we’d like to spend the night in our own bed.” Harry rubs her back, pulling away.

Sniffing her distress, Molly nods, “Good then, very good. And Hermione? Are you sure you can’t come tomorrow?”

Forcing a smile she shakes her head, “I’m sorry, Molly. Not this year.”

“What of your New Years plans?”

“Theodore and Harry have been kind enough to gift me a trip for Christmas this year—a tour of the oldest bookshops in Germany.” A slight fib—yes it was a trip to Germany, but it was to visit Wilfred and Adalrik, and all three of them would be going.

Ronald scoffs a laugh, “Fitting.”

Theodore pulls her closer, shooting the unmated alpha a glare.

“Oh, how generous,” Molly clasps her hands with a teary smile. “I hope you enjoy yourself.”

“Thank you,” she smiles.

Arthur rubs his witch’s shoulder in comfort, smiling at the three of them. “All our love and wishes to you now then, Hermione. We’re so glad you were able to join us tonight.”

“Oh yes!” Molly nods, moving to embrace her.

Hermione resists flinching away, sucking in a small lungful of air to prepare herself for the noxious and repelling smell betas had up close. She reciprocates Molly’s crushing hug weakly, insides churning in revolt.

“And where is mine, Mrs. Weasley?” Theodore interrupts the hug quickly.

Molly jerks away, eyes flashing to the wizard. “Oh, you! Family calls me Molly!”

He lets the older witch drag him into an equally crushing hug as Harry curls Hermione into his side, playing his role in her rescue. Theodore lets Molly have her way just a few minutes more, carrying on a conversation with her while trapped in her embrace.

“Molly, dearest, let these young people to themselves. The boys will be back in the morning.” Arthur coaxes the witch from the embrace.

“Oh, yes. I suppose,” she collects herself, retreating.

Theodore grins at the wizard, shaking his hand. “Arthur.”

“Happy Christmas, Theodore.”

“Happy Christmas,” he and Hermione tell them.

Molly squirms where she stands, “One more hug from my Harry.”

Theodore leads Hermione to the floo as Harry appeases his surrogate mother, hugging her tightly. “We’ll see you in the morning, Molly.”

Each taking a handful of floo powder, they wait for Harry.

Ron wanders over, “Can’t decide if I’m staying or not. You lot off to a party?”

“Home to bed,” Hermione shakes her head.

“Fancy a nightcap?” His eyes squint suggestively.

“Not for me,” she shies back, “It’s been a long day.”

“Live a little, Mione—”

“Hermione.” Theodore corrects the wizard, curling his empty hand around her.

Ron glares up at Theodore, alpha pheromones rolling off him in waves.

Theodore’s seeping out in response, his posture straightening to intimidate Ronald.

“Right then,” Harry butts in, stepping between his bondmate and his childhood friend. “See you in the morning, Ron.”

Hermione takes that as her cue to leave.

Stepping into the floo, she drops the powder and calls her destination—disappearing into the night.

Chapter 3: Chapter Three

Chapter Summary

Back from Christmas hols

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Monday, January 19, 2004

Smiling at Theodore, Hermione adjusts her dress skirts, sitting down at the table the wizard had found for them to take their lunch in the ministry canteen located in the Reverse Atrium—which was possible to reach via two halls to either side of the lifts, or by lift, and was a portion of the ministry she was unaware of until her employment there. Despite the intended convenience for ministry employees and the variety of food choices, Hermione rarely found herself utilizing the place except during Theodore's visits. The wizard attempted lunch with his mate at least once per week, and both invited her along each time—an invitation she accepted most days so she wasn't unused to being there. But something about the atmosphere this particular afternoon was setting her on edge.

"What is it?" he asks, noticing her discomfort, his eyes flitting around the large area as the lunch trays—previously levitating—settle on their table.

Shaking her head she adjusts her chair slightly closer to the alpha, beginning to set the table the way she likes it to busy herself, "Nothing, Theo."

"Hermione," he says under his breath in warning, his brows drawing together.

"I don't know," she says, glancing around as she sets each of their utensils to rights beside the trays of food Theodore had obtained before her arrival. Despite the early hour, the Reverse Atrium was quite busy which was rare, especially midweek. "Is there something happening here today?"

"You forget I'm not actually employed by the ministry, love." Theodore grins gently, sliding a hand toward her in offering.

She accepts it immediately, squeezing it for comfort as they sit. "Where do you think Harry is?"

"I believe there's a new case causing him a bit of grief," he provides as she traces the lines of his palm to soothe herself, focusing on him instead of the many wix about the canteen.

"Something about smuggling he said."

“Lots of paperwork then, he’ll be in a grand mood over that.”

“Already is.” Theodore smiles, brushing his thumb across the backs of her fingers. “Tell me what it is you’re working on while we wait. Anything new or interesting?”

Letting out a gentle sigh of appreciation for his talent for distracting her, she begins rattling off her current projects. “And there have been quite a few artifact requests since the new year, so I’ve been in the more obscure histories which I always find interesting—although, the real intrigue is with some of the artifacts themselves.”

“Why’s that?” he prompts.

“Well, they are ancient vessels from a coastal region of the mother continent, dating back to areas with dense magical populations at the time, probably some of the first magical communities in fact. But what’s curious about them is that no one has quite figured out what they were used for.”

“And what do you think they were used for?”

Worrying her lips in thought she shrugs a shoulder, sharing her theories, “From what I can tell? Possibly potions or some sort of fluid. They are sealed vessels and they require breaking to be opened, so potions don’t make much sense as they wouldn’t be accessible. But if they were storage for something less common, or volatile even, it could make sense for them to be sealed.”

“That is interesting.”

“Isn’t it?” She smiles fondly, watching his own academically-driven mind muse over the possibilities. “In any case, it’s been stimulating, and I’ve enjoyed compiling the references for the Unspeakable. I think I might do some research of my own on the subject.”

“Good.” He smiles encouragingly—he and Harry liked when she took interest in things. She knew it was because when she immersed herself in research her anxieties subsided some. They hated knowing she was so afraid to participate in the world. “Let me know if you’d like to visit my vaults to peruse the tomes, some of them may contain records dating back that far.”

Lighting up at the idea, she nods. “I will.”

“What else?”

Thinking about her work she hums, remembering the request she’d received that morning, “Do you remember Neville Longbottom? From school.”

“Yes.” Theodore nods, taking a sip of his drink. “Gryffindor, our year—big ears?”

“He’s grown into them,” she laughs softly, remembering Neville as a first-year fondly—his ears stuck straight out at the sides of his face.

“What about him?”

“Well, it turns out he is back at Hogwarts teaching under Professor Sprout. He’ll be taking over as herbology professor soon but he’s deferred for a year to finish researching cave-dwelling plants for a textbook he’s writing and has requested materials from the archives to cross-reference. I’ve been corresponding with him today and he’s completely the same as in school—just as passionate for plants and their magical properties.”

“Good for him then. Sounds brilliant.”

“It’s the research that is brilliant—genuinely,” she gushes. “He sent forward a few completed chapters of his manuscript so I could get an idea of the information he is seeking and, Theo, he has such a talent for writing. I think his field guide might replace the one we used back in school. It’s thorough and detailed and his illustrations are really beautiful.”

“That is some high praise from you,” his brows raise in amusement.

“Well deserved.”

“What is?” Harry appears, leaning around his wizard to deliver a sweet kiss in greeting.

“Hello darling,” Theodore greets his mate with a smile, tugging him back again by his crimson auror robes for a second small peck on the lips. “We were wondering when you’d find us.”

“Stuck in a meeting,” he sighs, coming round to Hermione on his way to his seat, stopping to press a kiss to her cheek. “Hello love.”

Smiling at her best friend, Hermione takes a deep breath, settling comfortably in the presence of her two alphas.

Harry sinks into his chair, observing the table, “You should have started without me.”

“We’ve kept ourselves busy.” His mate brushes off his concerns, releasing their lunch from the stasis charm he’d placed on it when they’d first sat down. “Tell us of your morning.”

Groaning, Harry launches into the details of his case and meetings as they all tuck into their meals. Hermione returns Theodore’s hand to him, instead setting her own with her napkin in her lap as she begins to spear her pasta and veg. As she eats, adding to the conversation only occasionally, she tries not to focus on the massive spread of foods in front of each alpha, nor the fervor both wizards ate with as they spoke.

In recent months, many things her friends did had begun to provoke her omega magic. Little things, things she had never bothered paying much mind to before, things indicative of strong alphas—like their eating habits.

Worse is, it felt embarrassing to be aroused by their appetites—attracted to it—even if she couldn’t help it. But the fact that it took mental effort to keep focused during their shared meals of late was mortifying. So she was bearing with it silently, not inclined remotely to clue either wizard into her dilemma. Especially knowing the cause was probably her biology pushing her to find a mate—knowledge that made her feel powerless.

Although she could admit it might be time—at an age where she no longer felt like a child, was healed from the war, and felt settled in *what* she was—the idea of interrupting her routine was paralyzing. She feared alphas. Feared the prospect of being consumed by her omega traits, lacked trust in anyone other than Harry and Theodore, was short in any sort of relationship experience, and, above everything, she didn't want her designation to rule over her decisions and force her to mate.

It had been five years and she had survived twenty-five heats on her own. She had stayed hidden through presentation, through war, through the aftermath, and through learning to regulate and meet her needs.

In no way was being an omega pleasant, and, yes, her heats were still incredibly hard on her, but she was managing with her strict regimen of potions, her elf, heat toys, and the aid of her best friends. She could continue how she was, she knew what to expect, knew how she would feel during her cycles... so there would be no mating. The risks outweighed the benefits.

“—honestly hate January.”

“You say that every year, darling,” Theodore teases his grumpy mate as Hermione tunes back into the conversation.

“And I mean it every year. The auror candidates make such a muck of the department—and I know they're learning. I know. And I'm not claiming to have been better when I started out. Merlin only knows the patience my mentors had for me. But really, it's ridiculous the amount of handholding they still need after six months of training.”

Hermione fixes her best friend in her teasing gaze, “They've only been in the field for two weeks.”

“Very true—desk work and drills aren't the same as their new duties,” Theo tacks on.

“It's not the fieldwork they're bollocksing up,” Harry chuckles, leaning back to rub at his eyes beneath his glasses. “On top of the smuggling case, I've needed to assign my junior aurors to oversee all the paperwork our trainees submit. It's splitting the task force. I can only allocate so many aurors to the case without disrupting the daily obligations of the department and we don't have enough evidence yet to send the case up to Robards and request more personnel.”

“It's hard being the boss, isn't it Haz?” Theodore grins, reaching over to caress Harry's wrist.

He had been in the Junior Head Auror position for the department just over a year now—an early but well-deserved promotion. The authority suited him and he was well respected in the DMLE, gearing up to take over for Robards as soon as the wizard died or retired.

“I'm knackered,” his green eyes brighten as he smiles back at Theodore, turning his arm until their hands are clasped together lovingly.

Hermione's heart warms, happiness for her closest friends radiating through her at the display.

Harry's attention turns on her and he reaches over, gently swiping a curl from her face, "Careful love."

Blinking to attention, she looks between the wizards, realizing something was wrong. "What?"

"You were beginning to purr," Theodore tells her quietly, a line of concern carved into his brow as he looks around the canteen to see if anyone had noticed.

Jolted by the information, anxiety creeps in and she tenses, glancing about as well, eyes picking out every alpha in the room—there were plenty.

Her attention settles on a pair of pale grey eyes watching her back.

"It's alright, it was only for a moment," Harry tries to reassure her with little success—she felt quite exposed now.

"Hermione, love?" Theodore calls her attention from Draco Malfoy and she turns back to their table, hands trembling in her lap as she forces her focus upon her lunch.

"No one's noticed," Harry says, moving his chair nearer to hers so he can comfort her.

Nodding, she wills her anxiety back, knowing nothing bad would happen to her while she was with them—they wouldn't allow it.

Still, nausea blooms with all the intrusive thoughts and fears ricocheting around her mind.

"Should we move to your office?" Theodore offers, trying to let Harry alone help her so they wouldn't draw as much attention. But despite his best efforts to dampen his protective instincts, he was beginning to overproduce pheromones to warn off other alphas from approaching.

"No, I just need to calm down—and so do you," she adds carefully in a whisper, brushing Harry off as she put on a composed mask, taking a sip of her drink.

Her blockers were strong and concealed most everything, and what they didn't she concealed with additional potions and perfumes, but as Theo and Harry were quite familiar with her condition and underlying scent, she knew they could still scent the pheromones she put off when she was afraid. Harry had once described it as 'souring.' Even suppressed, it could drive the alphas to react in her defense.

Their sensitivity to her was yet another reason she only occasionally met with them in public.

It took them each a few moments to regain control of themselves. Following her lead, Theodore claimed his drink, sipping it down to whet his palate with something other than her fear. Harry recalled his instincts to touch her with clenched fists, nails biting into his palms. They were quite good at it after spending five years around her and soon the tension broke.

She fights for a safe topic as they readdress their meals. "Luna says she expects the baby sometime in the next week even though the healers predict another three."

“Has anyone told the healers its best to listen to that witch?” Theodore tries to jest, his jaw just a bit too stiff still.

Chuckling, Harry shakes his head, “Luna always seems to know things, doesn’t she?”

“Yes,” Hermione nods, fiddling with the napkin in her lap. “I was thinking I would go to the shops this week to put together a gift for them. I’m sure they have most of what they need—Ginny’s been stockpiling Luna said and there was the shower in November—but I’ve thought of some muggle things they might enjoy.”

“I’ll take you,” Harry offers. “Might also be an idea to prepare some meals for them. I doubt they’ll have the time when they first get the baby home and I can’t see Ginny welcoming anyone into their home with her mate and infant.”

“I can take care of that this week,” Theodore nods, crunching on a bite of salad.

“I’ll help,” Hermione smiles, taking a long breath, her nausea finally settling.

“A birth in the family is exciting, I remember being around for Bill and Fleur’s two but I don’t remember this feeling of anticipation.” Harry shares, pushing back his unruly black hair.

Nodding in agreement, she shares, “I think it makes sense. You’re closer with Gin and Luna than Bill and his family.”

“True.”

Theodore clears his throat, eyeing them both. “On the topic of family—”

There is a commotion beneath the table and Theo winces. The wizards share a long look, Harry shaking his head slightly.

“What is it?” she asks, looking between them hesitantly.

“Not a conversation for here,” Harry says, eyes locked on his mate before he turns, smiling fondly at her.

“Do you have news?” Her eyes widen.

“We’ll talk about it after the baby comes,” Theodore tells her.

Before her anxiety can run away with her, she observes both wizards, taking in their relaxed bodies and the lack of conflict over whatever the topic is. With a nod, she decides to let things be for now. “Alr—”

“Harry Potter?” Someone suddenly calls loudly, drawing all three of their attentions out of the conversation. “You’re Harry Potter!”

A wizard is suddenly at their table, standing over them, reeking of beta musk. Wincing at the stench, Hermione tries to lean away inconspicuously, her hand halfway to covering her nose

and mouth before she can stop it. Both wizards are immediately on guard, their pheromones surrounding the table, drowning out the beta and clouding her head—luckily a normal reaction for two alpha’s invaded upon, unluckily dangerous for her.

A hand juts out to Harry as the beta addresses the table, “This is an honor, a real—”

His eyes fall on her.

“My god, Hermione Granger!”

Before the beta wizard can proffer his hand to her, Theodore and Harry are on their feet—Harry gearing up to play peacemaker while Theodore lets out a low growl of warning.

“Good to meet you,” Harry reaches out an arm to block his angry mate from the man, restraining his own designation-driven response like all aurors are taught.

The beta wizard flinches at the movement, obviously realizing what he’s done by approaching. “Oh, pardon me, Mister Potter, you’re with your mate. I didn’t notice. I was just so excited—”

“No harm done,” Harry forces a smile.

Hermione, dizzy and feeling endangered, stands, clumsily setting her napkin on the table, eyes flitting around in search of escape. If she didn’t get away soon she’d expose herself by giving over to her omega traits—already she wasn’t thinking clearly.

“Granger,” a voice calls to her and her eyes snap to grey ones.

“Malfoy,” she murmurs unintelligibly, hand gripping the back of her chair tightly to keep herself from swaying. He approaches a few steps, not coming as close as to invade upon her or the two already riled-up alphas.

“Do you have a moment to discuss a file? As a favor to me,” he asks, gesturing toward another table—the table he had been seated at when she’d noticed him earlier.

“I—of course,” she mumbles, shaking her head slightly to clear it. They had nothing work-related to speak about, but she thought that might be the point—he was helping her.

Sweeping an arm toward his table in invitation, Hermione steps toward him on shaky legs leaving Harry and Theodore to continue dealing with the rude beta wizard. He waited for her to get slightly past him before falling into step with her, his hand hovering over the small of her back. When she falters slightly he is there, his hand cradling her elbow to keep her upright. Halfway to their destination, the air begins to clear of pheromones and her short panting breaths steady, her instincts calming.

Arriving at his table he pulls out a seat for her, pushing her in gently once she’s settled. He reclaims his chair across from her, his hearty lunch and several files spread before them.

“Here,” he passes her one.

Pretending to skim the pages as the fog clears her mind, Hermione glances back at the commotion in time to see Harry dismissing the beta with a polite, yet stiff, nod. Theodore, on the other hand, was fully focused on her, keeping guard from afar. Harry notices her absence once he's turned back around, his eyes following his mate's gaze to her. Seeing she is safe, he returns his attention to Theodore. They speak quietly, Harry running soothing hands over his mate until he coaxes a kiss from the larger wizard, calming them both.

Situation diffused, Hermione turns her attention back to Draco Malfoy, exhaling her held breath.

"Better?"

"Yes, thank you."

He nods, perfectly coifed hair rustling slightly, "My pleasure."

She observes him, trying to understand his motives for helping her as she had been for the past year.

His gravitation to her could only be one thing—their designations. At least that is what she would have thought of the boy she knew at Hogwarts. But this man was different. She was as perplexed by him, and drawn to him, as he seemed to be to her. And he made her feel... less guarded.

"Yes?" he arches one of his perfectly groomed brows.

Worrying her lip she starts, "I've been wondering..."

His eyes light in interest. "Ask me."

After a moment spent ogling him, she shakes her head. "It's nothing."

Theodore appears at the table, obviously intending to retrieve her. "Malfoy."

"Nott." The blonde nods, standing politely in greeting. They shake hands.

"Good of you to step in," Theo tells the other alpha quietly in thanks.

"Glad to help." His elegant hands slide into his trouser pockets and Hermione can't help but fixate on them—him. Everything about him exuded *alpha* and it was difficult for her to see past it at that moment, still affected by the event and her instincts.

"Love, we should be on our way," Theodore breaks her from her trance. She nods, wordlessly accepting the hand held out to her, standing.

Grey eyes fix her in place as she takes up Theodore's side and she preens under the attention, her gaze lingering again, tracing the broadness of the wizard.

A few moments pass before her enclosed hand receives a gentle squeeze.

It takes a lot out of her to draw her attention, but she manages, giving Malfoy a shy smile goodbye as Theo leads her toward the lifts.

“All’s well?” he glances at her, obviously noticing how near to the surface her omega magic is.

“Yes.” Looking up at the tall alpha she questions, “Harry?”

“He needed a moment, so he’s taken lunch down to your office. Do you mind?”

They stop before the lifts.

“Not at all,” she assures him, sensing he’s on edge still. “I think we will all be more comfortable.”

“I agree.”

The lift comes and many get off, leaving only two others in the cage. They step on, Theodore pressing their destination indicator before taking up the back corner, allowing Hermione to hold onto him for balance instead of stretching to reach one of the handles at the top of the lift. She tucks both hands into the crook of his elbow as they descend, making one stop before theirs, ridding themselves of the other two wix.

Theodore looks at her, “That Malfoy, he’s been respectful to you? You still feel safe to work here?”

“Yes,” she nods, mulling over her alpha coworker’s presence in the department. “He’s decent to me—checks on me.”

“Keeps a distance still?”

“He doesn’t invade my space,” she confirms, stepping off the lift with Theodore as they arrive at Archives and Record Storage. “I know you two monitor him.”

“We want you to be safe,” he tells her as they make their way to her office.

“I appreciate that you do,” she tells him as they arrive.

He smiles and affectionately caresses her curls back from her face, leaning in to press a kiss to her forehead.

Harry opens her ajar office door having heard them, “Come on you two, let’s not waste the rest of our hour.”

... ..

Knocking on the door to her office, he waits anxiously, pushing his fine hair back with a rough hand. He’d spent an hour in his office attempting to complete his work for the day but hadn’t been capable of focusing since lunch. The scene in the canteen had upset his alpha

magic and he felt out of sorts and preoccupied with thoughts of the omega witch, of how dangerous the situation this afternoon could have become.

By his count, there were fourteen alphas taking lunch apart from himself, Nott, and Potter when the witch was present. If any one of them had paid even half as close attention to Granger as he did, they might have noticed her omega magic emerging that afternoon. It was the most reactive he'd ever seen her in public, she was normally so meticulous about her actions and reactions.

There was a sinking feeling in his gut that something was wrong. Maybe he was just paranoid seeing as he was so engrossed in the witch and her wellbeing, but watching as she was overtaken by the pheromones of her two overzealous alpha companions had sent a chill straight down his spine. Without intervention, she would have succumbed to the omega subspace leaving her vulnerable and exposed—her designation could have been revealed.

Draco had a very strong will, but in the end, was compelled to make certain Granger was in good health.

From inside the office soft padding sounds and the door opens slowly, the small witch stood before him, her wand in hand. Eyes widening, she opens the door a bit wider and smiles shyly, "Hello Malfoy."

He nods, letting out a nervous breath, eyes darting past her for a moment into the office—her personal realm, somewhere he'd never dared enter. To the right of her sturdy wooden desk stood a breakfront full of books and parchment, one of the shelves adorned in mugs and teacups. To the left of the room was an armchair with a throw and tea table, a small chest tucked into the corner of the room.

"What can I do for you?" The witch asks softly, her eyes upon him wide and eager.

Those fucking eyes.

"I wanted to be sure you were well." He clears his throat, eyes roving from her loose curls brushed back from her creamy, unblemished throat down her soft figure to the flared skirt of her dress to her stocking-clad feet on the woven carpet.

She hiccups in a breath, her pupils dilating. "You did?"

Bloody hell her magic was riled. Draco unclenches his fists, shoving his hands in his pockets to keep from reaching out to the omega, rumbling an affirmative. With those two syllables, he knew he needed to extract himself from her presence before he did something rash that might scare the witch.

"The canteen was a bit much for me today, but I am fine now," she murmurs, her own gaze picking across every centimeter of him, fanning the need for her burning in his chest. "Thank you again for helping me."

"Of course." He shudders in a breath under her intensity. "Granger—"

“Yes?”

She's perfect, bloody perfect.

Trying to keep his appearance casual, he speaks lowly, “You’re very near the surface today.”

Wincing at his words, she shies back slightly. “I—yes, sorry.”

He shakes his head firmly, “There is nothing to apologize for, it is just an observation.”

Worrying her lip between her teeth, her grip adjusting on her wand, she averts her gaze, drawing in a quick, fortifying breath. “Was that all?”

“No,” he shares, hoping honesty is the correct way to go about this. “I am concerned you won’t be safe here with how you’re feeling.”

Her warm brown eyes flash to him again, anxious, “Am I that obvious?”

Grinding his teeth he nods, “I think you might be.”

“But, I don’t understand why I’m so on edge,” she croaks, knuckles turning white around her wand as she glances past him into the halls, making sure their coworkers aren’t nearby to eavesdrop.

The souring of her scent strikes his senses and he feels suddenly guilty. He didn't intend for this conversation to scare the witch. What he wanted was to reassure her that she was safe around him and could rely on him. He wanted to build trust between them, to show he was a good alpha.

Trying to keep his voice soft he asks, “Has something happened? Something that's upset you?”

Her curls bounce around her face as she shakes her head, her free hand finding the handle of her office door, pulling it close to her like a shield. “My routine hasn’t—hasn't changed. I'm having a good day...”

Her stocking-clad feet begin to shuffle, her upset palpable as she digests his opinion.

“I—maybe I should take the afternoon...” she utters to herself, her attention having left him.

His nails dig into his thighs through the material of his trousers—he was mucking this up.

Looking up at him after several moments of contemplation, pinning him where he stands just outside her office, only a meter of space between their bodies, she frowns slightly.

Draco tries not to loom, shuffling another small step back, “Is there anything I can do to help you?”

He notices her forcefully break her attention on him, her big browns darting away as she retreats a bit further into her office.

"Anything at all, Granger."

Avoiding his gaze she speaks timidly, "The holidays were—I think I've been in proximity to too many of you for too long recently. Maybe...could you take some space?"

His chest tightens at the idea but he forces himself to nod, "Of course. If it would make you more comfortable."

"I think so."

Gulping down his protests, he nods. "If you—my door is always open to you, Granger. If you need me."

"Thank you, Draco."

Heart pounding at the sound of his name falling off her tongue, her office door snicks shut.

Chapter End Notes

hehehhehehehehehehehehe

OKAY BUT HOW DO YOU LIKE THEM SO FAR????
THIS IS A NEW DYNAMIC FOR MY DRAMIONE AND I FEED OFF OF THE
APPROVAL OF OTHERS SO PLS TELL ME IF ITS GOOD
DONT TELL ME IF ITS BAD THO, I WILL CRY o.O

Next chapter will be a bit rough >> we shall learn more about Hermione's heats and health

we're getting to Dramione in just a little bit now :))) a few more updates

Is the development too fast? Too slow? Goldilocks?

Everything making sense?

Also I have a discord, its pretty quiet but a good way to chat with me if you're interested. I also post when I update/update order there. this is the invite link, i think it expires after 7 days so comment if you want to use it and it doesn't work and I'll generate you a new one. <https://discord.gg/XEq8hMA>

Chapter 4: Chapter Four

Chapter Summary

A little bit of bad feelings---idk how to describe this chapter. Safe angst?

Chapter Notes

Honestly, I don't know if I'm a fan of this chapter. I am in such a bad writing place right now which is why I haven't been updating. I feel like such an imposter. If you like this chapter, that's great. I think the fic can also be read without it though, so, you choose.

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Saturday, February 14, 2004

Standing on the ornate step of the colorful little cottage dressed in vines free of their foliage, Hermione sets down the basket of things she'd brought with her, pulling on the thick chord of the house bell to indicate her arrival with a whimsical chime.

Ginny and Luna had welcomed their infant daughter into the world nearly a month prior without notifying anyone, sorely in need of privacy for the event and early weeks of motherhood. No one in the family had heard from the couple other than a howler Molly had received in response to her daily pestering of letters and unreceived floo calls which had apparently grown too much for her alpha daughter's nerves. And though Hermione had visited once at the end of January to drop by the meals and congratulatory basket of bits and ends they had prepared, she hadn't stayed to visit.

But, for Luna's birthday the day previous, Hermione had owled a small gift and letter, as well as hopes for their little family and offer of help should they be in need of it. She'd received a response that morning inviting her to the remote cottage in the country for tea, and an introduction to the newest member of the family.

The stained glass door of flowers opens and Luna is there in all her usual radiance, her long yellow hair loose and wild down her back. "Hermione!"

Embracing her fellow omega, Hermione smiles, "Hello Luna."

Ushered inside the house, beams of light from the many windows crisscrossing through the entryway, Hermione passes the basket over to Luna, "Happy birthday and congratulations."

“Oh, how thoughtful.”

Following her back into the kitchen, Hermione looks about. The last time she'd been in the cottage was just after the couple had moved in. They'd done wonders to the old bones of the place which was now decorated with murals on the walls, framed photos of the family, and mismatched furnishings—very Luna with touches of Ginny in places.

“Have you been well?” she asks, watching as Luna slowly unpacks the basket.

“We have been,” she sighs dreamily, her big eyes glittering. “I adore motherhood, it's the first thing to ever make complete sense to me—oh, this is beautiful!”

Luna lifts the baby mobile from the basket, plush rabbits and owls and branches of rosemary spin gently around as she inspects it.

“Wherever did you find it?”

“Actually, I made it.” Hermione blushes, fingers scrunching into gentle, nervous fists. Her crafting had been on the receiving end of taunting and ridicule during their Hogwarts days and she very rarely shared her projects anymore. “I thought their meanings suited a little one.”

“Oh, I see! New beginnings, transformation, love, and remembrance.” She pinches one of the plush imitations charmed with the scent of the herb. “Let's go hang it, shall we?”

Hermione nods eagerly, relaxing in the praise of her friend.

Following the barefoot witch up a spiraling staircase decorated in living flowers, Hermione scents the baby in the next room, just past the door that smells strongly of Ginny and Luna. They go there, opening the nursery door gently. Hermione sucks in a deep breath, her omega instincts clouding her senses as she lays eyes on the small, sleeping child all pink cheeks and curled limbs.

All at once a thick feeling overcomes her like the room is melting. She feels her knees knock gently together as she hyper-fixates on the baby in the bassinet, a low keen escaping unintentionally.

She hears her name called and then feels gentle hands on her shoulders, shaking her slightly. “Hermione? Can you hear me?”

There's a quickening around her, fading into the buzzing emptiness she's subsided to.

“Ginerva! Help!”



Hermione suddenly blinks and finds herself trembling in the rocking chair by the nursery window, Ginny crouched in front of her rubbing circles into her palms, brown eyes locked on her. Next, sound comes back in the form of a command she wants so badly to listen to.

“ Take another breath, omega—good. One more.”

Her shoulders rise and fall as told, full awareness flooding her fuzzy body, snapping her out of the last bits of numbness. Blinking slowly, she looks around to the now-open window, Luna swaying gently behind the shoulder of her mate, their daughter tucked in her arms.

“Hermione?” Ginny asks, suddenly reaching for her face.

Flinching away on instinct, she stares into the brown eyes of the kneeling alpha with fear.

Ginny knows.

“I-I—“ she stammers, her body arching back into the chair, knuckles turning white.

“Hey, no, no. It’s okay, you’re safe.” The ginger pulls back, putting her hands up in a no-harm fashion.

Luna locks eyes with her as she looks for an escape, expression guilty, “You *are* safe, Hermione. We understand why you’re hiding your designation and Ginerva was trying to give you privacy... but you went into subspace meeting Thalia and I was concerned. I couldn’t pull you out on my own.”

Hermione trembles, attention turning to Ginny. “I, you—you’ve known about me?”

“I noticed a few years ago. After I started spending time with Luna,” Ginny explains carefully, keeping her voice soft. Adding for her benefit after a moment, “If I wasn’t personally acquainted with another omega I don’t think I would have ever—”

“You’ve known for years?” Her heart pounds.

Winced the ginger nods, “Yes, Hermione. I have.”

“Is that... does Harry—do Harry and Theo know that you know?” She was panicking, she felt exposed by this revelation, vulnerable.

“I went to Harry about it, yes. He had me make a Vow, but even without it, you’re safe with me, Hermione. I would never do anything to harm you.”

Hermione worries her lip, looking between the mated pair, mind spiraling. “Who else has noticed?”

Ginny’s brows draw together with hesitance—her non-response spoils Hermione’s stomach.

Others knew.

“I, I need to go home,” she croaks, tears dripping down her cheeks, arms winding around her torso, holding herself in an attempt to comfort her magic. “I need—“

“Theodore is on his way, we just spoke—“ A crack of apparition outside interrupts the alpha who tenses and draws herself back to standing. “That must be him. I’ll go let him in.”

Their house bell chimes as Ginny makes her way out of the room, leaving the two omegas and babe in the nursery.

“I’m sorry,” Luna murmurs quietly, remorse clear in her regard.

Hermione was stuck on her feelings that others *knew*.

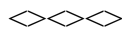
“It will be alright Hermione,” Luna says in her airy voice, smiling encouragingly as they listen to the two alphas downstairs.

“Hermione?” Theo calls.

Feeling weak, she gets to her feet and finds her way back to the stairs, her stomach twisting violently. Theodore waits in the entryway wearing a worried look, blocked from moving further into the new mothers’ home by Ginny. She makes it down the steps with the help of the railing and shies away from the ginger as she passes, giving her a wide berth, nearly knocking the frames from the wall.

As soon as she’s within arms reach, Theodore pulls her to him, humming deep in his chest to soothe her. One of his big hands moves to cradle the back of her head protectively, scrunching her curls in his fist. Knowing she is safe with him Hermione molds herself to his front in relief, hands twisting in his robes.

“Thanks, Weasley,” he says softly, leading Hermione from the cottage.



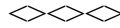
Since finding out others knew about her designation, Hermione hadn’t been able to stop shaking. Theodore had brought her back to Grimmauld Place and tucked her under the heavy covers of his and Harry’s bed, drawing the curtains over the windows to block out the mid-winter sunlight, leaving only the bedside lamp and a fire in the hearth to illuminate the bedroom. The effect was warm and comforting. Still, she hadn’t been able to calm down enough to speak. In fact, it was taking all of her mental energy to keep herself from slipping back into subspace.

Not wanting to disturb her or worsen the situation, Theodore anxiously hovered in the doorway, waiting for her to ask for something or for his mate to come home—whichever was first.

Harry was over at the Weasleys for the afternoon to spend time with Ron. Their old friend had complained in recent weeks about the state of their friendship and to appease him Harry had planned an afternoon to reconnect. And if Harry were to rush home for her, it would only damage the remnants of their brotherly bond further. She didn’t want that for Harry who still valued the youngest Weasley boy as a friend.

Although she could not verbalize any of this at the moment, Theodore seemed to recognize both of their needs as he hadn’t called for his bondmate just yet.

After a while, her eyelids grew heavy and she dozed off, breathing in the comforting scents of her alphas.



It was early evening when she woke, her shaking had stopped and worries eased somewhat with the rest. Harry sat at the side of the bed in Sirius's old armchair sifting through a few files on his crossed knee, his glasses perched on the end of his nose. She watched him for a while before his green eyes flashed, suddenly looking back at her.

"Hey love, how are you feeling?"

"Who else knows about me?" she croaks, tucking a handful of the covers under her chin to unobstruct her view of him. Harry sighs tiredly, shutting his work. With a gentle smile, he stands and motions for her to let him into the bed.

Climbing under the covers, he leans back against the headboard and tucks her into his side, petting down her sleep-disturbed curls before starting with, "Anyone who knows loves you, and would never share your designation. Even without the Vow I've made them all take, you'd never be outed by them."

"Who, Harry?" Her voice wobbles and she presses closer to him.

"Some of the family. Ginny, Arthur, Bill, and Fleur," he says quietly.

Squeezing her eyes shut she forces her next question, "Did they sort it out all on their own?"

"Bill and Fleur could smell you because of their creature magic, Ginny because of her familiarity with Luna, and Arthur sorted it out the holiday you left early because of the pheromones. But no one has told anyone. No one will tell anyone." He rubs her arm.

"Why didn't you tell me?" she whispers, trying to keep her fear at bay as she processes this information.

It was only the family, it wasn't anyone who would threaten or blackmail her with the knowledge. She should still feel safe if they'd all known as long as Harry is implying and it hadn't impacted her life up to this point.

Still, "Harry, you should have told me..."

"We didn't want to worry you, Hermione." His green eyes lock with hers as he tips her chin up with a finger, his gaze full of remorse and honest care for her like always. "You have been doing so well and we want you to continue to live with confidence. Not telling you... it was a calculated risk, and I'm sorry if you think it was the wrong choice. We made it thinking we were caring for you. If there was any potential impact of course we would have said something." She burrows closer to her best friend, curling herself up smaller beside him. "I'm sorry you're feeling so affected. We thought we were sparing your feelings, not hurting them."

Shaking her head slightly she speaks into his shirt, “I know your intentions were to protect me.”

“Always.” He assures her, his arm around her back curling her closer.

They lay there a while, Hermione thinking, fingers playing with the buttons down the front of Harry’s shirt. Having him there was calming, if only Theo—

“Knock knock,” Theodore says from the open door, carrying two of the dining chairs in as a folded table and two trays of food come floating in behind him. As the wizard sets everything up, he turns and looks at her. “Hungry love?”

Nodding, she pulls away from Harry and crawls forward toward the edge of the bed, the covers going with her. Harry removes himself from his reclined position, pressing one last kiss to the top of her head as he goes to help his mate shift the table closer to the armchair near the bed.

They let Hermione choose her place first as she rounds the small table to the seat closest to the hearth. Before Theodore can sit in the other dining chair, Hermione catches his sleeve and pulls him over for a hug, wrapping her arms around his middle and burying her face in his chest. “Thank you for rescuing me.”

His large arms engulf her in return, pulling her up on her tiptoes so he can bury his face in her neck, “I’m sorry we didn’t tell you.”

“You would have scared me,” she whispers back, knowing they did what was best for her even though she hates that additional people know her secret. “I’m scared now, but I didn’t have to sit with it.”

“Would you like to talk more about it?” Theo offers as he pulls away, cradling her chin lovingly.

“No, not now.” Maybe not ever. Losing control was the most terrifying thing that could happen to her.

Theodore nods, moving to help her settle into her seat, pushing her in. Harry sets plates in front of each of them and Hermione takes the utensils and napkins, making things just so.

“Why don’t you tell us about your day, Haz?” Theo suggests. “How was the Burrow?”

Harry nods, tucking himself into his seat carefully, napkin going to his lap. “Everyone is well. Molly is hoping to get the family together the first week of May as usual, and she was pretty focused on her new grand-baby.”

“Thalia,” Hermione interrupts quietly as Theodore serves her.

“A girl?” Harry’s eyes light up. She nods, knowing she doesn’t need to remind them to let Ginny and Luna introduce her to the family on their time.

“That’s a beautiful name,” Theodore grins, spooning legumes onto Harry’s plate.

“She was darling,” Hermione murmurs, thoughts straying before Harry clears his throat, saving her.

“Uh, Arthur is busy in his retirement, still fiddling with the new flying car. He’s asked if we’d join him on a trip to muggle London soon, he wants to find another project.

“And Ron... well, we only did a bit of catching up. He is pretty wrapped up in his upcoming birthday plans. Molly was organizing a family party but he’s asked for something more public this year. It’s going to be held at the new restaurant in Horizont Alley.”

“He’s booked a party at La Voûte?” Theodore’s brow arches. “For how many?”

Harry frowns as he pushes food around his plate, “He said forty, and... he’s not inviting most of the family.”

Hermione scowls.

“Does he even know forty people?” Theodore frowns—he and Ron didn’t get on well for more reasons than their designation.

Sighing, he shrugs, “I didn’t ask. And after that, he just went on about his newest exploit.”

“Is he still chasing after betas?” Theodore’s lip curls and Hermione flinches.

Ron’s revolving door of witches was no secret, but the hard-to-stomach part was his bragging of knotting them. Outside of heat, the prospect of some of her heat toys—which were still smaller than an actual alpha’s member—was daunting. Even masochistic witches were wary of knotting, or at least she had read they were in her research of designations. She couldn’t even begin to imagine the pain of taking one if she wasn’t made for it.

“His birthday party,” she tries to turn the topic, swallowing her nausea. “It’ll be close to my heat.”

“The day before your preheat,” Harry nods, frowning.

“Were we invited?” she asks.

“Yes,” Harry hums, “But it might be best you don’t go.”

“I won’t hear the end of it if I skip. I should just leave early. He thinks I’ll be leaving for Australia the next day anyway.” She spears a chunk of grilled chicken, already sorting through the mental catalog of lies she tells about visiting her parents and working with memory specialists to explain her periodic absences.

“I don’t agree,” Theo winces, looking apologetic when they meet eyes. “Today was frightening, Hermione. You’re still weeks from your heat yet you got caught in subspace—and we don’t know why. I don’t think going to a party with forty-some random designations

is smart. We got lucky today that you were safe and with people we trust. But if something were to happen in public, it's likely not going to be this same outcome.”

A chill runs down her spine and she worries her lip, heart beginning to thud hard against her ribs. He was right, of course. What happened today was dangerous for her. She'd been so caught up on the fact that more people knew about her that she hadn't taken a moment to process the incident. Without an alpha there or pheromones to influence her, she'd ended up in a deep subspace. It was all her doing. Her omega magic. If she—

“Hermione,” Theodore calls, his hand slipping over her much smaller one to anchor her in the room. “*Hermione, breathe for me.*”

Her eyes flash to his and she lets his alpha tone seep down to her bones, knowing his suggestion is to her benefit

“*Good, let your heart rate slow. You are safe.*” He coaxes her further from her mind.

Safe. She's always safe with Theo and Harry.

“I—” her breath hiccups out, eyes blurring slightly.

Harry pulls her other hand out of her lap, uncurling it to inspect the bleeding crescent marks left by her nails. “Darling, could you grab the—”

“Ditany.” Theo nods, standing slowly and pressing a kiss to Hermione's curls. “I'll be right back.”

Continuing to breathe deeply, Hermione tries to stop her chin trembling and work through her overwhelmed state. “Harry...”

“Take a few more moments, love.” He tells her, reaching up his napkin to help dry her few tears.

She nods, sniffing gently as Theodore returns. They work together to heal the small self-inflicted wounds on her hands.

“Better?” Theo asks her.

She nods again, suddenly exhausted.

“Good.” He smiles tenderly, reclaiming his seat. “Let's finish supper, then maybe we see what's on the telly? You could stay over tonight.”

Hermione forces a weak smile agreeing, but isn't able to put the day's events completely out of mind. Both alphas notice and exchange a look, silently communicating about how to best help her.

Theodore reaches out as she turns back to her meal, brushing her hair over her shoulder kindly. “Hermione, love. Would you please look at me?” She meets his gaze. “Harry and I will never let anything happen to you. Whatever is going on, we'll sort it out, yeah?”

“Just like always.” Harry reaches out, setting a hand on hers in comfort. “We’re going to keep you safe.”

Looking between her alphas, she tries to convince herself its true. Up until now, it has been. But something inside of her was changing. She could only guess it was her omega magic. And despite their years of extensive research, what she was experiencing couldn't be explained away as a regular phenomena. These things shouldn't be happening to her, not as closely monitored and regulated as she was. Something was wrong and it was terrifying.

“I trust you,” she tells them, putting on a better smile for their benefit.

And she did trust them.

But she couldn't help worrying that whatever was happening wasn't something they could fix.

Chapter End Notes

cringe face be honest. Does it go with the previous chapters? I really can't decide

Thanks everyone for reading :P

Chapter 5: Chapter Five

Chapter Summary

A glimpse into what Hermione's heats can be like, how Harry and Theo support her, and what is going on with her omega magic???

Chapter Notes

If you notice me changing tense... no you don't.

If you don't remember, :::: is POV change

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Monday, March 15, 2004

Her bones creaked and muscles spasmed where she was curled into the corner of her panic room, sticky with sweat and slick, her hair matted against her neck. Every breath was a short huff, body too stressed to pull in more air past her burning throat. Everything burned in fact—skin, eyes, throat, cunt. Her teeth felt ready to fall from her skull. There was no strength in her. No energy left to force her way out of the stiff position she'd ended up in in her fragile state.

Something must have gone wrong quite early on in her heat to end up in such a state, she hadn't felt this awful in years. Her mind felt as equally raw and oversensitized as her body from the experience—not that she could remember it.

A while later, after crying and mutely begging for help, she notices that the safe room is pulsating around her—the effect of a hazy purple light triggered by a spell warning her there was someone in the room outside. Undoubtedly it's Harry or Theodore. She realizes she must have been inside the hidden room for quite a long time for Dally to retrieve them and attempt contact.

Everything in her wants to crawl to the exit and seek their comfort, but not even her stubbornness can convince her body to cooperate and obey her desperate commands.

::::

He'd arrived early like always, checking the archives for any sign of danger or threat before Granger arrived. She was meant to be back from leave today and that made him anxious, just

like each of her heats did.

Would this time be it? Would she be claimed when next he saw her? Would he see her again?

All last week he had tortured himself with thoughts of her, even going as far as to anticipate an early return like she had chosen after her previous heat before the holidays. He'd tried to bury himself in work as a distraction, praying to Merlin and Circe that she'd come back untouched and he would have more time to be around her—maybe even endear her to him. But she hadn't returned and he'd had to wait the weekend as well, pacing and moody by himself at home.

This morning he was several hours early so he knew the chances of her coming anytime soon were low and tried to keep to his office which failed miserably. It wasn't long before he was haunting the stacks, waiting to catch a glance of her curls or a breath of her unique scent.

... ..

It had taken many painful, slow shuffles through the destroyed materials she'd dragged into the safe room with her to get near enough to the entrance to reach out of the wards with one hand. After a long moment she spent panting, her tears blinding her, a gentle hand closed firmly around hers and despite the oversensitivity of her everything, it was comforting to finally be touched by someone after the brutal heat alone.

Whoever was there on the other side of the ward was patient with her, giving her a few moments before exerting gentle pressure to prompt her to come out. She wanted to—wanted to let them help her—but she was so weak and it *hurt*. Her tears continued to fall, dripping off her nose, and running into her knotted curls. She waits for them to understand, her fingers curling gently against their wrist in a pitiful attempt to claw her way out.

Several minutes pass. Whichever alpha holds her squeezes gently once more and she lets out a great sob, trembling, growing desperate.

Finally, another hand closes around hers and she is gently dragged from the safe room into the waiting arms of her best friend. The friction with the ground feels as if her skin is being peeled away. Her eyes clamp shut and she whimpers weakly on every exhale.

A clean, scentless, cotton sheet drapes over her, and a second warm body crowds in from behind—Theodore. Harry draws her limp body up into his lap, his hands careful not to touch her glands or endogenous zones.

“Hermione? Hermione, are you with us?” Harry murmurs, supporting her in his arms, his panic palpable and scent bitter in her nose.

“Put her on the bed,” Theodore instructs, sounding just as concerned as footsteps rush around the room, “Dally!”

“You're safe, we have you. You're okay.” Harry lifts her with him as he stands, and something slick and heavy slips out of her, striking the floor with a wet smack. The emptiness

she suddenly feels is like taking a hot poker straight through her abdomen and she wails, blacking out.

... ..

At lunchtime Draco ventures to send Potter a missive, asking after their common interest. It's unusual for her to be absent and he can't help but feel worried. There must be a reason for her delay, one other than the horrible possibilities concocted in his cruel imagination— *she's been mated and her alpha is keeping her all to himself*, being the worst of them.

He waits impatiently in his office for Potter's response, angry and anxious. But doesn't receive one.

... ..

Warm water runs over her shoulders and neck as she comes to again. Her bathroom is dimly lit with scentless candles and she lays cradled in the bathtub, Theo at her side using a pitcher to pour the bath water over her, slowly cleansing her sticky skin.

"Hey love, you're okay. We've got you," the alpha tells her in a quiet voice.

She hums, trying to speak—still unable to.

"Haz is getting something for you to sip on, and Dally is finding you some clothes in case you want them. But you can just lay here until you're feeling better. Everything is going to be okay."

Slowly, she nods, eyes rolling toward the ceiling as a wave of exhaustion hits her.

"It's okay, you're okay."

... ..

He'd not bothered to apparate home from the Leaky after stopping for a drink after work, needing a long walk to burn some of his pent up frustrations and sort out his thoughts.

Potter hadn't shown up to the office either, meaning something *had* happened with Granger and he was needed elsewhere until it was sorted out—which only concerned Draco more because it meant something was wrong. Perhaps she'd been claimed against her will. Or she had gotten hurt...

Merlin, he hoped she wasn't hurt.

Putting his head down, trying to force those unwelcome thoughts out from between his ears, he continues through the brisk March weather. Passing muggles of all sorts, he makes his way into an alley so he can apparate and get himself a proper drink to drown all his worries away.

He wasn't her alpha, he had no business feeling like, feeling... anything.

... ..

Beyond out of sorts already, Hermione presses her lips together, refusing the potion and weakly turning her head away into her pillow.

“Hermione, please,” Harry pleads with her, his hand trembling around the potion vial. “You need to take this, your body needs rest.”

A soft groan of protest is her only response as Harry tries again to give her the foul concoction from where he sits beside her on the bed. She doesn’t want a potion to sleep, she doesn’t want to lose herself to the dreamless, emptiness again after just waking out of it.

“Haz, love, give her a bit more time. Once she’s up to it she’ll take the one’s she needs.” Theodore chimes in from somewhere in her bedroom. The weight beside her on the bed lifts and a soft shuffling happens before their voices come again from further away, “I know you’re feeling afraid right now. We don’t know what happened during this heat and she’s in bad shape—”

“She looks like she did after her first ones—”

“I know—”

“You don’t know!” her best friend snaps. “You weren’t there. You didn’t see...”

The silence that follows is heavy.

“Darling...”

“Her heats are going to kill her... it's only a matter of time.”

“Harry.”

“She looks like a corpse. She’s nearly as cold as one... What if she doesn’t—What if she can’t—”

A weak sound in her throat tries to interject their conversation. Something of protest... agreement... she doesn’t know. She didn’t choose to make it.

“Come out in the hall, let's try not to disturb her.”

“Theo, we can’t lose her.”

“We are not going to lose her. We’ll sort things out once we get her better... Hey, look at me. Harry James Potter, look at me.” Theodore demands gently. “We will not lose her. Wilf and Rik will be here in the morning to help and then all of us will sort this out. Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“Good, now let's let her rest.”

... ..

Draco leans against his floor, hands braced on the mantle beside his crystal goblet of firewhiskey.

He wanted to hurt someone. Wanted to curse everyone in the past who had put him on the wrong side of the war. Who made him a dark wizard and took four years from him. Four years he could have spent proving himself to his witch— *his omega*.

She forced his presentation. She was his alone for a blissful moment during the darkest time in his life. The omega witch he had to give away. Who was secretly his entire world.

Now some other alpha had taken that from him. And coming to terms with that was proving impossible. He knew in the morning when he returned to work, violently hungover from the alcohol he consumed tonight, he would do something inadvisable.

... ..

Tuesday, March 16, 2004

Curled up beside Theodore, she dozes, listening to everyone speaking around her. Adalrik and Wilfrid had come from Germany to be with them as they spoke about her recent heat and the other perturbations to her omega magic of late. Her participation in the conversation was minimal as she remembers very little of her heat except for the still-present ache of it and the mental exhaustion she now faces.

Not remembering is nothing new, she usually fell into subspace after the first few hours of heat and didn't reemerge until well into the third stage. But since regulating her potions and implementing heat toys she'd had much more bearable experiences compared to her first few, and usually came out of them in moderate health. Why she was reverting was as unknown to her as the others.

"Being more reactive does not suggest something bad occurring, it can be hormonal." Wilf shares, journal open in his lap where he's curled up beside his brother. "Do you remember when you first start noticing the changes in her, Harry?"

"The changes in her magic have only been in the past six months. But I began to notice she wasn't looking quite right after her heats well into this past year like we've spoken about. More tired, not recovering as quickly, weaker for longer, colder... this time was, was—"

"Frightening, you said," Rik hums deep in his chest, scratching at his eyebrow. "Wilf is right, it could be the hormones, it could be age. But also could be the omega magics looking after her. Omegas are not meant to be alone."

"She isn't alone," Theodore grumbles and she smiles slightly against him.

Rik shakes his head, "The two of you don't fuck her."

Harry growls. “Language.”

“You know what I am meaning. Mäuschen has needs you are not caring for. Obviously, the supplemental tools she uses are not helping during her most vulnerable time. Not anymore. An omega in heat without an alpha suffers. Mäuschen is the strongest omega we have known, but that doesn’t mean she isn’t suffering. It is possible everything she does in place of an alpha isn’t enough anymore.”

“M fine,” she tells them, still resting her eyes, and still holding firm to her stance on finding an alpha—she doesn’t want to mate, she doesn’t want her freedom taken away, she doesn’t want to leave Harry and Theo and their comfort.

“You aren’t.” Harry contradicts.

“If whatever this is worsens you can be exposed, Hermione. It’s important for us to talk about this,” Wilf joins the argument.

Flinching, she opens her eyes, meeting the stares of the others, “you don’t mean that.”

“I do,” Wilf nods, eyes pleading with her. “You are only omega we meet who goes this long without an alpha. Back when I manage on my own, I too have moments where my magic lashes out. It was not as subtle, and I was not on as strict a regimen as you but I start blacking out for periods, start submitting unconsciously—“

“That’s not what it’s like for me—we’re careful. I’m never alone with others, especially not alphas. Having rougher heats is... I just need to make some adjustments—“

“But that’s not all it is, Hermione,” Harry stops her, tone worried. “You’ve been disoriented, reactive to alpha traits, more susceptible to alpha pheromones... even Theo and I affect you more than we used to.”

Mortified she sits up, away from Theodore at the revelation. She hadn’t thought they’d noticed, “I— My magic can be temperamental, that’s not new. I—”

Wilf makes a noise in his throat, “What about the baby the other day? What happened?”

“That wasn’t...” she tries to explain, curling into herself slightly. “It wasn’t...”

“Instinct? Desire? Need?” Wilf challenges.

Tears come to her eyes and she tries to blink them away, fighting for an argument.

Rik jostles his brother slightly and Wilf gulps, suddenly realizing the intensity he came on with, “Hermione—“

“I think it...” she’s trembling now and Theodore is trying to coax her back to him to seek comfort. She tucks herself into the corner of the sofa instead, wrapping her arms around herself. “Seeing Thalia made me realize I-want-children-eventually.”

Hermione chokes on the confession, anxiety creeping in as she speaks about this so openly. She hadn't confided in anyone about what happened yet. She'd been torturing herself with ideas of motherhood, of seeking out an alpha, of mating. But how could she trust anyone? Revealing herself... so many things could go wrong. She wanted things she couldn't and it hurt somewhere deep in her chest. She grasps for more to say.

"I panicked when I saw the baby and I ended up in subspace. I just felt so—Harry and Theo are both so good to me. I'm not—an alpha would... What if I ch-choose wrong? What if they take me away?" Her teeth begin to chatter as she shares her fears, gasping for enough air to speak. "What if he keeps me locked up? I need, I don't, I don't, I—there's no one I... I don't—I don't want things to change. I can't never see you again. I don't—I don't..."

"No, of course." Wilf agrees, horror-stricken, his voice much softer. "That is not what I—"

She sobs, "I wish I wasn't an omega. I just want to be let alone."

Everyone watches her sadly, there for her but unable to console her through this experience which is unique to her.

Though Wilf was an omega, he had Rik who saw him through his heats since failing to manage them on his own—he had the protection of his brother, the scent of an alpha, the understanding of their government, and legal safety nets. And Luna. She had declared herself to the Ministry and took their suppressants, but lived with her father under a Fidelius charm until choosing to mate Ginny. She'd never been bothered by alphas because they could never find her. She was happy isolating until she was ready. That wasn't Hermione.

Harry gets up from his chair in the sitting room, coming over to crouch in front of her, holding her ankles. "Hermione, I..."

But there's really nothing to say to comfort her.

Hiccoughing wetly she tries to control herself. There's nothing any of them can do for her more than they already are.

Reaching out, she rubs a thumb over the scratches she'd accidentally put on him when coming out of her heat, guilty and remorseful and self-loathing.

He leans his face into her touch as she continues to calm herself, shutting his eyes. His lashes clump with the wetness from brewing tears and he whispers to the room, "We're going to do everything we can. We're going to figure out what's caused the changes. We're going to fix this."

She wants to believe him.

... ..

The lift lets him out in the corridor opening into the Auror offices and he struts through the noisy bustle of wix in various states of uniform—some in their formal crimson red, others

freed of that layer and instead clothed in only their undershirts, wand holsters, and warded slacks.

Holding himself with confidence practiced since birth, Draco makes for the back where Potter's office is—Junior Head of the Auror Department etched into a plaque on the door. He knocks twice, impatiently waiting as eyes start to turn to him.

The door swings open and his green eyes widen. "Malfoy."

"Have a minute?" He grits his teeth, trying not to glare. The shorter wizard looks worse for wear—bags under his eyes and scratches down the side of his neck. His heart thumps hard against his ribs.

Potter steps back, letting him inside. Before he can speak the other alpha gets his wand out, waving it to erect privacy wards. He takes it as a sign to start, "Where is she?"

Sighing, Potter pinches the bridge of his nose beneath his glasses "This isn't a good time, Malfoy."

"Just tell me if she's okay," he pleads with the other wizard.

"We shouldn't speak here."

Advancing on the man, he grabs a fistful of his red robes. "Please."

Green eyes regard him wearily, "She'll be back tomorrow, we can talk then."

She'll be back tomorrow. Tomorrow.

"Get out of here."

He obeys.

Chapter End Notes

Wreck me people

EDIT:

Thanks to everyone who left great comments on this chapter. It really helped me get back in writing mode.

Chapter 6: Chapter Six

Chapter Summary

Feeding my Draco obsession with this one!
Little bit of angst, little bit of hopelessness.
It's going to get worse before it gets better.

Chapter Notes

I'm anxious for people's thoughts about this one. There's a lot of subtle designation specific behavior in here that I'm very excited about. I have another big chunk of story written and I was going to make this all one big chapter, but decided it was better to break it up. So hopefully I'll have another chapter out soon. Then I think I'm going to transition to another fic while I let this all digest.

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Wednesday, March 17, 2004

The hot water beat against her sore muscles, trying to force its warmth into her cold body. She was sitting on the tile floor, cheek pressed against her forearms as they held her knees close, and her curls were heavy down her back. There's a gentle knock on the bathroom door before it opens, her little elf shuffling in with a folded towel and her robe for her.

Glassy eyes turn on her and squint, "Why is missy on the floors?"

A smile is forced out of her and she huffs a laugh, "It helps to sit here."

The elf whistles a sigh, pattering around to prepare things for her day ahead. Harry had convinced her to sleep in a bit longer this morning instead of getting her usual early start with a promise of breakfast from the cafe she liked so much in muggle London. And Theo had asked if he could spend the day with her at work, promising to bring his own project so as to not disrupt her. She had agreed.

The floo chimes to indicate an arrival and Dally stops her fussing, popping out of the loo to retrieve whichever alpha has come to fetch her. A few moments later a soft knock interrupts her boil. "Hermione? Good morning."

"Hi Theo," she calls back, shutting her eyes as she turns her face into the spray to let her voice be heard better.

“How are you today?” he asks from the other side of the door.

“Better,” she sums up. It wasn’t a lie exactly. She was feeling much better in comparison to her first hours of consciousness following her heat, and even yesterday when all she could manage was naps and more naps. But she wasn’t back to her health prior to heat. Her lungs hurt, she had a slight cough, she was still oversensitive and cold, her eyes itched, and her breasts were swollen and tender.

At least her blood had stopped sometime in the night.

“Good, good.” He doesn’t believe her. “Haz left to get breakfast. Rik and Wilf are joining us, but they’ll be gone by suppertime. They’re going to check and see if they can find any information for us in their archives.”

“Right,” she hums. “Are you ready to be at the ministry today?”

“Yes, I’ve packed some tomes and a journal. Are you still up to going?”

“I’ve already missed two days.”

“You’re not well, Director Dekin understands.”

Turning her face back into her arms she lets out a long breath, preparing herself to get out of the shower spray. “I’m going for at least the morning.”

“What was that?”

Grabbing hold of the lowest shelf, she pulls herself to standing and reaches back to turn off the water, immediately feeling her achiness return. She steps out onto the bath mat and grabs her robe, wrapping it around herself as she goes to the door, opening it further than the crack Dally leaves. “If I am not feeling well enough to work around lunchtime, I’ll come home.”

“Okay. Good,” he nods, a spark of relief in his eyes.

“Go wait in the kitchen, there’s hot water if you want a cuppa. I’ll be out as soon as I’m ready.”

Smiling, he retreats through her bedroom and shuts the door after himself. She leans against the wall for support as soon as he’s out of sight, biting her lip against the pain in her hips and other joints.

It was beginning to feel like a bit much—putting on such a brave face about everything. Though breaking down and hiding didn’t feel like the better option.

She had spoken to Wilf privately the night before, listening to his concerns, listening to his theories. He too thought it might be her omega magic acting out because of her reluctance to mate.

A mate.

Her hypothetical partner felt like the only thing left she had control over. Her body wasn't her own, her life was a lie, she survived on secrets and hiding. There was no plausible instance in her mind where revealing herself to someone—an alpha—felt like a good thing. It felt like a sacrifice. It felt like suicide. How could she trust an alpha not to control and use her designation against her?

There were good alphas out there. Harry, Theodore, Ginny... and there were decent alphas interested in her based only on her designation or their instincts, like Draco Malfoy. But finding someone who would respect her, who would maintain her freedoms, who would love her...

Her parents had been in love. As a girl she'd always hoped to have a relationship like theirs—now an impossibility under the circumstances.

Wilf told her as gently as possible to make a list of a few alphas, vet them from afar, and then just... pick one.

She thought not.

Fortifying herself with a slow breath, she pushes off from the wall and enters her bedroom, calling for her elf.

Dally pops into the room, "Yes missy?"

"Could you please help me with my hair? I can't do it myself today," she confesses. Even the thought of raising her arms long enough to dry it was exhausting. Applying her products and styling it was out of the question.

"Dally would be most happy to missy," the elf tells her. At the snap of her fingers, the chair Hermione keeps in the corner of her bedroom slides out in front of the mirror and the little stool her elf uses comes out from beneath the wardrobe. She sits stiffly, leans her head back, and allows the loyal creature to help her with the chore that is her curls.

Dally is gentle and works quickly, done much faster than Hermione ever is. She thanks her elf and stands, blinking the black spots from her vision before moving to the wardrobe, stepping inside the magically enlarged space. Selecting one of her knit winter dresses in mauve and a carmine-colored satin slip for beneath, she wanders back into the room, dressing. Dally retrieves for her stockings, knickers, jewelry, and cream loafers before popping away somewhere else in the flat.

Hermione emerges from her bedroom attempting to clasp her necklace. Theodore looks up from the Daily Prophet and his tea, motioning her over to help with the fastener. Holding up her curls for him, he secures the fine gold chain then wraps her in a hug from behind, pressing his cheek beside her own, "Promise me you're well enough. We can stay home—I'll read to you."

"I need my work, I need to distract myself. Please can we go?" She knows she made him no promises.

Theodore's warm brown eyes darken and he takes to actively controlling his breathing: in through the nose, hold, out through the mouth. It wasn't what he wanted—needed—to hear.

"Please don't get upset." She turns in his arms, pulling him down to her in a warm hug, hoping to comfort him. "I know you're afraid for me. But I need this. I trust you to be there with me. I trust that nothing is going to happen."

"I just want you safe," he says into her hair, rumbling deep in his chest. "You and Haz are my family. I won't let anything happen to you. Not while I'm breathing."

"I'll be better in a few days," she announces for both their benefits. "Living this way has worked for years, I just need to find my new balance."

He nods, squeezing her gently before pulling away, "Take your potions so we can go to breakfast, yeah? There's a new one there, Rik brewed it overnight."

Looking at the many vials on her kitchen counter waiting with a steaming cup of black tea for her, she tries to convince herself that really was all she needed to do—make an adjustment to her regimen. An extra supplement or a new dose. Something simple like that.

That could work, right? *Right?*

... ..

Draco can smell them as they arrive and quickly conceals himself behind a nearby shelf where he has a sightline to the lift bay. He'd been pacing the corridor for quite a while already, worried Potter had lied about her coming back this morning. It was already much later than her habitual arrival time.

A chime sounds as the lift doors open and Potter, Nott, and Granger all step out—an alpha to either side of the witch.

"Harry, we're here, now please stop worrying." He hears her tell the hovering Gryffindor as he looks her over. Just looking at her he can tell she is unwell—buried in thick robes too warm for the weather outdoors, even with the forecast of rain. The presence of both of her alpha companions was also telling and did nothing to quell the uneasiness in his belly. If it had taken her this long to return from her heat and was still in such a state, he knows she had been much worse off.

If the alpha who saw her through her heats did anything to harm her he'd—his nails bite into his palms, tearing his flesh despite their short length. He takes a deep breath, trying to catch her scent like always. Sterile with a hint of ripeness hidden. But no foreign scent, no alpha musk—she was always so careful about that. And he appreciated it most times she returned from heat, but this time he was ready to hunt the wizard down for failing her.

Shutting his eyes and retreating for a few moments to calm himself, he continues to eavesdrop.

“Alright Haz, off you go. Don’t want to be late.” Theodore tells his mate. It seems he’d be watching Granger today.

“I’m going to go put down my things. We’ll see you at lunch Harry.” She presses up on her toes and delivers a kiss to the wizard’s cheek then turns and disappears down the hallway back to her office.

Harry grabs the front of his mate’s robes to say his goodbye and they share a kiss, lingering near one another a moment longer than casual. “Send a note if anything—”

“Of course, my love.” Nott pets down the unruly black hair just under his nose as he draws his mate into a hug. “I’ll take care of her.”

“I know you will,” Potter sighs, leaning into the other alpha. “I’m just…”

“I know, Haz. Me too.”

“Go,” Potter says, forcing a positive expression.

Theodore smiles reassuringly and disappears after Granger.

“Malfoy, I’ll assume that’s you?” Potter says once Nott is out of sight.

Stepping out from behind the bookcase, he nods his head in greeting. The wizard looks more tired than yesterday, deep circles under his eyes. “Can we talk?”

The Gryffindor considers him a moment, then sighs. “Topside. Ten minutes?”

Draco agrees with a nod and turns down the opposite hall toward his office, needing to get his robes. When he returns to the bay, Potter’s already taken the lift. He waits for the next one, catching the morning rush and getting held up longer than he has the patience for.

When he finally makes it to the atrium, he almost gets pushed to the back of the cramped cage and shoulders his way out, shooting scowls at the wix flooding the lifts. With purpose he struts through the traffic going the other way and the wix smartly split around him so he doesn’t barrel them over.

At the very end of the Hall of Arrivals, past the floos and guest entrances is a single lift that will take wix topside to muggle London. It’s rarely used, which means he doesn’t need to wait. With a chime, he arrives on the streets of London, and pushes out through the reddish door onto the pavement.

Looking around he spots Potter waiting on the corner of the block. When the other wizard spots him, he tilts his head in indication to follow him, so Draco does, catching up with him halfway down the next block. They continue the silence for another few blocks until they arrive at a nearly deserted muggle park. Potter starts on the path around the pond, throwing up a quick privacy ward inconspicuously beneath shuffling robes as it begins to drizzle.

“She looks ill,” Draco starts as soon as it’s safe, unable to restrain his worries and anger any longer, a slight growl accompanies his statement. “What kind of an alpha leaves their omega

in such a state following heat? Days later and it's obvious that she wasn't properly taken care of. That her needs weren't—"

"We know. We're handling it." Potter's delivery is unconvincing. He's too calm about this for Draco's taste.

"Is she being abused?" he forces himself to ask. "Was she hurt?"

Flinching, Potter shakes his head in the negative. "No, not that—"

"Then why does she look like she has been? And this isn't the first time either." He wants to shake the other man. "It isn't—"

"Malfoy, you don't know the full situation," the Gryffindor stops him, looking stricken. "It's more complicated than—I can't elaborate without betraying Hermione's privacy. So just..."

As words fail, Draco feels his anger turn more desperate. "Seeing her like this is... I know you and Theodore take care of her between heats, but her other alpha is failing her."

Potter digests his words, mouth opening and shutting a few times before he glances at him out of the corner of his green eye, focus shifting. "Theodore will be around more. I'm sure you've noticed how out of sorts she has been recently."

Draco's teeth clench. Her recent struggles were important, but so was her safety and wellbeing during—

"She's so afraid of alphas. So afraid of mating..." The words stop his building protests. A calloused hand rakes through unruly black hair as they continue to walk, barely looking at the other. Potter clears his throat, "Those of us supporting and protecting Hermione have ascertained that mating is becoming more necessary for her and we intend to help her do so safely."

He nearly trips, his heart suddenly thundering.

The shorter alpha steels himself, shoving his hands deep in his robe pockets as he continues, "Theo and I are compiling a list of potential alphas for her, and at my suggestion, we would like to include you."

Draco pulls Potter to a stop, looking him dead in the eye so he is sure he is hearing him properly. "Come again?"

"Aside from my mate and myself, you're the alpha she's allowed closest to her. Her allowance of you in her space speaks highly of your character, especially as you're unmated. And in spite of your proximity, you've conducted yourself in a way that has allowed her to continue to feel safe in her workplace. My mate and I recognize that and thank you for it."

"You know how I feel about it," he murmurs, a lump lodged in his throat, mind racing.

"We know how you feel about her too."

He keeps quiet, not needing to say anything to confirm it.

Potter clears his throat, looking away slightly glassy eyed, “She doesn’t know of the list yet.”

“I would assume not.” He nods— *they trusted him. They were going to suggest him to her.* “Should you desire any documentation or Vows from me, just ask. I’ll cooperate.”

“I know.” Potter begins to walk again, waiting for him to fall into step. “Malfoy, just because you’re being considered doesn’t mean—”

“Doesn’t mean I’ll get to be her alpha, I know.” The words threaten to kill him but he agrees. “I will respect her choice.”

“Good,” Potter sighs.

They walk a while longer in silence, both digesting the words just exchanged. Draco can hardly believe it and pinches himself to ensure he isn’t asleep. This was... the two people in Granger’s life she trusted more than anyone wanted to help him engage with her. Him—Draco Malfoy. He didn’t deserve it—didn’t deserve her—but Merlin and Circe, he’d do anything for her. Even if it meant walking away. It would destroy him, he’d never recover, but he’d do it if she asked it of him.

Nearly all the way around the park now, Potter checks his wristwatch. “I should be getting back, I’m late.”

“Oh.” He breaks Draco from his elated panicky feelings.

“Enjoy your day, Malfoy, we’ll speak again soon.”

The wizard makes to leave and Draco catches his arm, meeting their gazes one more time. “Potter—Harry... thank you.”

Tuesday, March 23, 2004

He could smell her in the stacks, back deep in the archives. Her sterile scent nearly hidden by the lignin of parchment and the must of age and ink. Putting his references back on the return bench for the elves to re-shelve, he wanders into the tall shelves, following her trail until he can hear her heart beating slowly in the next aisle. He turns the bookcase, staying at the end of the row so as to not invade her space, and knocks gently against the wooden end.

The little witch looks up from the tome in her lap where she sits curled on the floor partway down the row, her curls messy in front of her face and eyes wide when meeting his. Seeing him she relaxes, “Hello Malfoy.”

“Hello Granger. What are you reading?”

Sweeping her hair behind her shoulder and consequently exposing her pale throat, she looks back at the book in her lap, dragging a finger along the page, “I’m trying to find good

references for flora, but I keep getting distracted by other interesting titles.”

“What caught your attention?”

“Burial sites and traditions of ancient wix communities on the mother continent.” She smiles at the page before looking up, closing the book. “There is an ongoing request on my docket from the Department of Mysteries. The Unspeakables have been researching sealed vessels discovered on one of their dig sites. I’ve taken an interest as well.”

“It sounds fascinating.”

His witch hums shyly, looking around the aisle instead of at him. “What is it you’re working on?”

“A clause about courtroom conduct, specifically length of trial. It isn’t very interesting, I won’t bore you with it.”

“Have you—” she stops herself, worrying her lip.

Draco gives her a moment to decide if she’ll ask, but after several long breaths decides whatever her thought was has passed. He clears his throat, “Can I help you up?”

“Oh,” she looks at him and then her position and nods. “Yes please. Could you set this on the trolley for me?”

He enters the aisle and takes the large book held shakily aloft from her, setting it with her other books before offering both of his hands to her. She slips her small, cold hands into his much larger ones and allows him to pull her to her feet, bringing them nearly chest to chest with the action.

Certain she is stable, he takes a step away, letting her hands slip out of his as she smooths out her skirt.

“Are you well?” he asks, unable to help himself. He’d been keeping away from her the last several weeks like she’d asked him to even though it felt awful. He would continue to give her space again after this if that was what she wanted. He just needed to see and hear for himself that she was alright. Observation in passing and Potter’s infrequent updates did little to settle his worries about the witch. Especially since learning of the list her friends planned to present her with.

“I’ve been... I’ve been better but I am getting help. I’ll be back to normal again soon... I’m sorry if the temptation of being around me recently has worsened. If I could stop this—”

“Please do not apologize.” His teeth clench, his instincts rearing. “You have nothing to be sorry for.”

“I... it feels unfair for me to be here if it impacts others or potentially puts—”

“Granger.” He stops her politely before she can get caught up in her anxieties. “This is your workplace, I want you to feel safe in it. If at any time you feel like my presence compromises

yours, I would like you to tell me. I can make adjustments for you. I can take more space.”

“Why would you do that for me?” Her brown eyes hold him stuck before her.

Unsure a confession would be welcome, he struggles to come up with an appropriate answer.

Wrapping her arms around her waist, she speaks quiet daggers at him, “I don’t want an alpha, Draco. Letting you... you know, look after me sometimes, it’s—if messages have been crossed, please hear me now: I’m not ready for an alpha. You aren’t—I don’t want to be kept.”

“No, I know that,” he nods, clearing his throat. Circe, he’d made her nervous. He takes a subtle step back to give her more room, cursing himself silently. “But your comfort is more important to me than my working here—”

“It shouldn’t be,” she takes a step towards her trolley. “I don’t want that.”

His pulse jumps, palms getting sweaty as he begins to panic and resists the alpha urge to follow her.

Bloody hell. This was too much. He’d come on too strong. He shouldn’t have said a thing. He was trying to be something to her she obviously wasn’t ready for. He should have consulted Potter or waited until they’d had the list conversation with her before approaching. Waited for them to ease her into the idea. Potter could have gauged her reaction to the possibility of him, told him how to go about this—interacting with her. Told him if he should back off, if he should quit. She was the only reason he kept this horrible position in the first place. If she didn’t want anything to do with him...

He’d just felt like he needed to check on her. Needed to be around her for five bloody minutes. It’d been months of this uncomfortable distance. Before they’d see each other briefly in the department a few times a week. Had polite exchanges. He’d sometimes grab a high up reference for her if they passed in the stacks even though she could get it with magic. But now...

He shouldn’t have approached her. She’d asked for space. He should have controlled himself. It was rude and invasive and idiotic.

Draco hated this.

He hated that she was so afraid, that she had to live with fear. Fear of alphas, fear of him. He needed to backtrack and fix this.

Taking another step away he raises his hands slightly in a ‘no-harm’ fashion. “I apologize.”

“I don’t want an alpha.”

“I know. I know. Seeking you out today wasn’t about that. The past year hasn’t been about that,” he tells her sincerely. And it is true. Of course he’d like to earn her affections and trust, but mostly he just wanted to be around her. “You’re a brilliant witch, Granger, and I like speaking with you very much. I know there are things that don’t make it as simple as it

sounds, including our history. And I won't lie and tell you I don't hold an additional interest ___”

“Please go?” She stops him with a quiet whimper.

His heart clenches in his chest, protective worry nearly overwhelming as he watches her retreat further, putting the trolley in front of herself like a barrier.

He nods stiffly and turns to go, alpha magic screaming at him to comfort her as he weaves his way back through the archives and towards his office berating himself the whole way. His ears buzz and his senses are full of her as he flees.

Once behind his locked door he lets his control slip, turning to strike the wall in anger with himself. *Why did he do that? Why couldn't he just do one thing right when it came to her?*

All he wanted was for her to feel safe and comfortable with him. He wanted for her to know he would do anything, become anything she needed. But that was too much.

She didn't want that. She didn't want him.

... ..

Curled up on the couch with a glass of red wine, Hermione stares at the upright grand piano in the corner, quietly playing to her as Harry and Theodore converse in the kitchen a few rooms away—she's sure about her.

It had been a long day, a long month. Thoughts of alphas and mating taunted her day in and day out. She'd been having nightmares about being found out and faceless monsters taking her away. About the dark of subspace.

Subspace was meant to be a place for omegas to retreat when threatened or in distress. A way to escape conflict and trauma. But she'd never found the loss of time and awareness comforting. In heats, it was useful, because it spared her most of the pain, but in daily life... one of her worst nightmares was being put into subspace and never coming out.

Several things could force her there. Alpha pheromones if they were thick enough, and riled enough. Recently any hint of alpha pheromones would start the fall. Pain would put her there. Intense fear or feelings of being cornered. An alpha's command, which she would always fight but never win against. Moments of intense want or desire apparently.

Although it was meant to be self preservation, an omega could not take care of their needs in subspace. They cannot feed themselves, they cannot rest, they are entirely obedient and oblivious to the world around them.

It was also meant to be a way to prompt an alpha's care. If an omega retreated to subspace, their needs were not being met. And the scents an omega put off while in that dark nothing indicated exactly what they needed. Protection, comfort, medical attention, and the like.

Her needs weren't being met. And there was a growing risk she might end up in subspace by accident if she didn't sort out her care and the changes to her magic soon.

Wilf's counsel earlier in the month had been weighing heavy on her and she thought about it often. Choose an alpha before an alpha chooses for her. Before she's put in danger. Make a list, observe and eliminate, then commit. Love isn't what is important now. Choice is. Health is. Safety is. It's time.

But that felt so wrong.

The idea of committing on a whim, on a surface observation... it made her skin crawl. She should be able to continue on her own, with support between heats, with her toys and potions and circle of friends hiding her. Things shouldn't be changing. Her choices shouldn't be disappearing before her eyes.

But today when Malfoy approached her... he was so good to her, so careful, so afraid. And it led her to believe that he acts the way he does towards her for more reasons than her omega status like she'd been wondering the last little while. He called her brilliant, and said he liked speaking with her. He was good to her. Polite. Helpful. And she liked his attention as much as it scared her.

It made her wonder: What would it be like to have an alpha? If she ignored all the risks and potential dangers, would it be something she wanted? She tried to imagine some faceless entity when contemplating but soon found him to have white blonde hair and storm grey eyes.

Hermione couldn't say she'd never considered the wizard for herself before. But that could also be said about Ron and about Harry, or any alpha she'd had considerable interaction with over the years. Imagination wasn't want. She was absolutely certain she didn't want Ron. And Harry was... just the least of all the evils. He was her family. Her brother.

Malfoy was different. He'd protected her and wasn't, he didn't... there was history there, yes. He'd tormented her through childhood, but as they got older he'd let her alone in favor of Harry. And then the war and Voldemort changed him. When they were captured he'd saved her. But... was it him or the alpha? Now as an adult wizard, were they the same? What would it be like to let him be an alpha to her beyond the surface care she allowed him to show her.

If she listened to Wilf and made a list of alphas, would Draco Malfoy be on it?

The song currently playing ends on a long note like a considerate hum. She waits for the next song to begin, holding her breath. The second hand ticks away on the mantle above the floo, timing her. At forty two seconds she exhales and the piano keys depress like they'd been waiting for her and not the other way around.

No. Draco Malfoy would not be on the list because there would be no list. She would not be forced to choose. She would not have her agency taken away. These fantasies would never escape to the real world. She'd just be disappointed and endangered.

Swirling her wine as a distraction, the clock chimes the hour and she glances over, noticing how late it's gotten. She should be getting home soon with how poorly she'd been sleeping. It would do her well to turn in earlier than normal.

“Theo, Harry?” she calls into the house, untucking from the couch and setting her glass on the side table. “I think I’ll be leaving.”

“Hermione, love, could you wait for a minute?” Harry calls back, voice getting closer.

Perching on the arm of the couch, she doesn’t wait long before they are crowding through the doorway.

“What is it?” she asks, knowing something is the matter the moment they join her.

“Could we have a possibly upsetting conversation with you?” Harry starts, taking up residence on one of the armchairs across from her. Theodore sinks into the other—they’re giving her space.

Warily, she moves back to the couch cushions, “What about?”

Clearing his throat, Harry starts, “When Rik and Wilf were here, they suggested creating a list of potential alphas for you—”

No. “Harry—no.”

“Hermione, please listen,” he pleads with her.

“Wilf has already spoken to me about this. It’s not what I want. I don’t want to discuss it.”

“Love, please hear us out. We’re not trying to hurt you, or corner you. We just want to talk.” Theodore reasons.

Looking between the alphas, she frowns and averts her gaze. Despite the feeling of her insides clawing their way outside at the prospect of having this conversation again, she holds her tongue, knowing this will be over sooner if she withholds further protest.

They take her silence as the go-ahead. “We know the idea of an alpha is scary and overwhelming to you. But due to recent events we’ve also recognized that you might lose your choice to biology, and we want to help provide you with options instead.”

Theodore takes over, “Haz and I have come up with a few names for possible—”

“Stop,” she demands again, squeezing her eyes shut and holding her breath to keep in the rising sick.

She doesn’t want to fight about this. She doesn’t want to consider this. She doesn’t want to face this. She’d already decided. No list. No names. No alphas.

“Hermione—”

“No more. Not tonight. I—not tonight.” Standing to leave, she turns away from them as she approaches the floo to hide her welling tears.

“It isn’t just a list of alphas able to help you through heats, Hermione, its potential partners. Wizards we think you might get along with.” Harry makes to follow her. “You could date them. We would help make sure they didn’t—”

“I said enough!” She turns back around, shouting at her best friend. “I don’t want that!”

“I know,” Harry chokes out, posture slumped and defeated. She sees he too is crying. “I know you don’t. But what else can we do? You’re killing yourself. I won’t let that happen.”

“Harry—”

“I won’t lose you, Hermione!”

Letting out a breathy sob, she wipes angrily at her tears. It hurts to see Harry so upset but she can’t help but think, “Maybe it’s better this way.”

The wizard recoils, becoming rigid. His normally gentle voice is a rasp, “What?”

Trying to reveal her feelings to him as delicately as possible without lying, she expresses the things she’d been thinking in the time since her heat. “I won’t be forced to pick someone, Harry. I won’t have my choice taken away. If I can’t do this on my own, maybe I should just... stop.”

“Please don’t say that.” Theodore speaks up, moving to stand behind his mate, his eyes as wet as theirs.

“I’m tired. I’m tired and there is no one I want. I don’t see how life with an alpha is better for me. Not with the risks. Even if the alphas on your list agreed to dates, as soon as they found out about me their demeanors would change. Or they’d change once I was claimed. I won’t put myself in that position. I won’t forfeit my freedom just to survive. I’ll never submit myself to that.”

“You don’t mean it.” Harry is trembling, shaking his unruly head. “Hermione, you don’t want to die.”

“I don’t,” she agrees, forcing a smile out through her tears. “But I want an alpha even less.”

“Hermione,” Harry sobs, taking steps toward her. When she’s in reach, she allows herself to be pulled into his chest and Harry buries his face in her shoulder, heaving great sobs. In fact, she’s not sure she’s ever seen him cry quite like this. It was very childlike and vulnerable, like after Sirius... It hurt deep in her chest, like it was her own lungs crying out in protest. But her grief isn’t loud anymore, its quiet and private. Just like her life.

“What if you mated us?” Theodore says from where he stands a few meters away, holding himself as he cries. “We love you.”

Despite loving and trusting both alphas before her, fear courses through her at the thought of them mating her. “I can’t do that.”

“Yes you can,” Harry pulls back, cradling her face in his big hands. Green eyes pleading with her, wild and glittering in his desperation to help her. “Hermione, you’re my best friend. I’d do anything for you. You’d be safe with us, nothing would have to change.”

Covering his hands with her own, she shakes her head ‘no’. He was right but not in the way he meant. It wouldn’t change anything. It would be this same life but marked. And although the protection of the bond was an attractive offer, she couldn’t do that to them. They couldn’t see to her the way her omega wanted. “You don’t love me like a mate. You don’t love me like Theodore.”

“You’re my family.” He leans his forehead against hers.

“I know.” She shuts her eyes, hating this with every fiber of her being.

“Please Hermione,” Theodore begs, looking heartbroken behind them. “Let us help.”

Harry starts and locks their gazes again, eyes ripe with an idea. “We—we are—Theo and I want to start a family. We’re looking for a surrogate. Rik and Wilf are helping. But maybe you—”

His words contact her like jumper cables and she tugs away, trying to remember the situation, trying to rationalize Harry’s words and not take them as a threat. “No.”

“Please, Hermione, just try. If not us, pick someone and try. Please,” Harry chokes on his next lungful, wheezing around his tears, “I won’t lose you. I know you’re afraid but you need to do this.”

“Harry, no.”

He reaches for her, “Do it for me!”

“My entire childhood is yours!” She cries out in misplaced frustration, shaking him off.

He flinches, “Hermione—”

“I love you. I love you and I’ve given you everything. All these years, Harry. My mind. My time. My health. My sanity. My parents—and the night you presented I’d have given you anything. That feeling that overcame me haunts me! I wanted you! I’d have done anything in that moment. I wasn’t me anymore!”

“Hermione—” he sobs, hands clutched over his heart.

“What’s left of me is mine!” She holds herself as tremors rattle her down to the bone. “You don’t know how this feels! You don’t know what it is to be an omega—or before this a muggleborn. I’ve always been on the outside. Judged and on display. Instincts fighting wants. I’m sick of it! I’m sick of all of it!”

Harry can’t form words now, can’t breathe through his tears.

“I hate this,” she cries, clawing at her clothes. “My body is against me. There’s a voice in my head that I can’t shut up.”

“Hermione,” Theodore says wetly, almost as a warning as he gets hold of his mate to comfort him.

“Every single record of my designation says I’m meant to ‘repopulate the wizarding world’. That I’m meant to ‘produce witches and wizards of considerable magical strength’. No one cares about my thoughts, my feelings, my wants, my well-being.” She’s desperate for Harry to understand, and desperate to be let alone to her choices. “Not once they know what I am. They will never leave me alone. And once I’m claimed I’ll be gone. Hermione Granger will be dead—”

“Love, take a breath—“

“No Theo! I don’t want that life! I never wanted any of this. I have suffered enough. The war, the running, the hiding—I’m done. I’m done trying. If I can’t survive on my own then I should just—”

“ *Enough !*” Theodore demands and her mouth snaps shut so hard her teeth clash.

Hermione can’t help the new tears that burst forth from her when the weight of the command lifts marginally. Both wizards immediately advance to comfort her but she retreats on instinct, stumbling past the side table and falling on her bum with a yelp as consequence.

Harry is beside her quickly, hands raised in surrender, eyes red and swollen as he tries to get his breath back and check her over.

“I’m sorry,” she wails, not knowing what else to do.

A small breath escapes him and his sadness renews, head hanging over her lap as he pushes a hand up under his glasses to stop his tears from falling. “Oh, Hermione.”

They both hold their grief inside, attempting to stopper it while breathing raggedly for several moments.

“You want to start a family?” she chokes out, mind finally catching up with her emotions. “Harry, that’s wonderful.”

He peaks out of his arm, appearing utterly devastated. “I didn’t want to tell you like this.”

Reaching out, she pets down a clump of wild hair poking out by his ear. “You’re going to make wonderful fathers.”

He whimpers, “I’m sorry I’ve been so selfish—”

“You haven’t,” she promises, pulling him to her chest by his shirt collar, cradling his head in her arms. “Harry, I’m terrified. This wasn’t about you.”

“I’ve taken you for granted—”

“Only when we were younger. You’re so good to me.” Looking up past her best friend she reaches out a hand to Theodore who hovers nearby wearing a guilty expression. “Both of you are so good to me.”

The other wizard gratefully accepts the invitation to join them on the floor and curls himself around the both of them, pressing a kiss to the crown of her head, “Hermione, I’m so sorry. I shouldn’t have taken that tone—”

“It’s okay.” She comforts him. “We’re all going to be okay.”

Chapter End Notes

Please let me know your thoughts! What are you liking? What are your favorite bits? What do you want to know more about? What's something you're confused about? Any other burning questions?

I know we all want more Dramione, and its on its way!

I hope you all know how much your comments help me. They get my gears turning and make the story better!

For new readers, or those who haven't seen it: I have a discord server for my fic writing. I'm not *super* active in it, but I get notifications for it and chat about what I'm writing atm. Link to join is below!

<https://discord.gg/d34jDwMr>

Chapter 7: Chapter Seven

Chapter Notes

Mind the dates.

If you can tell I wrote this in less than 24hours no you cant. But if you find glaring errors please point them out to me lol

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Thursday, April 1, 2004

When they'd arrived at the Burrow for George's birthday dinner, Hermione couldn't help but be anxious with the three other people who knew of her secret all in attendance. Having attended events with them in the know previous to her finding out, she knows she shouldn't feel worried as nothing had come of it, but not every emotion is reasonable. She knew better than anyone.

After a delicious supper made by Molly, they all gathered in the living room for presents, and Bill came to speak to her having been informed of her relatively new knowledge.

Nothing was mentioned outright as they were with company but he made it a point to tell her how much he, Fleur, and their family cared for her and would never let anything come of their knowing. It was left at that and he'd retreated back to his place on the sofa with his wife.

She found herself relieved by the assurance.

Hovering behind the loveseat Harry and Theodore currently shared, a non-alcoholic bev in hand, she observes the room, happy and sad at the same time.

The people gathered here were very dear to her, and they'd come so far since the war. Healed from things none of them should have ever experienced. She wished she could be more present in their lives, wished she felt safe enough to do so.

George sat circled by them on the floor, various wrappings and packages strewn about him as everyone spoke and laughed and wished him merrily, supporting him on one of his hard days—his and Fred's birthday would probably always be a hard day.

The two young ones curled up close to each side of the birthday boy, helping in the unwrapping. Squealing as they are gifted bows and strings from the scraps.

Angelina watches lovingly from beside Percy—sans Penelope for the event as she'd gotten caught in a work obligation. Molly and Arthur share an armchair, Molly perched on the arm.

And Ron—

“How much longer do you think we’ll have to stick around for this?” The youngest Weasley boy mutters to her, coming up from behind.

Hermione flinches with surprise, the ice in her glass rattling as she turns to watch the looming alpha wizard better. “If you don’t want to be here, Ronald, excuse yourself.”

He scowls, “At least I bothered to attend—more than you can say.”

She frowns, looking away, “I’ve apologized for not being able to attend your birthday. I had to travel early and I sent my gift along.”

“That’s not the point Mione, you didn’t even try. I’m one of your best friends.”

Trying to keep their conversation from disrupting the merry, she turns toward him and speaks quietly, “Ron, we haven’t been close in years—“

“So what, you’re not going to celebrate me on my birthday just because we don’t spend every day together anymore?” He’s invading her space now.

She grips her glass tighter, feeling threatened, “I had a conflict. That doesn’t mean—“

“I was counting on you being there, Mione. I had guests who wanted to meet you—meet the golden trio.” His tone tinges with anger but she can’t get past her surprise. He hadn’t mentioned he’d promised her attendance to his guests. “You embarrassed me.”

The disbelieving laugh that leaves her is more uncomfortable than mocking, but Ron takes it as the latter.

“*Don’t laugh at me,*” he growls under his breath, intending to intimidate a beta. She nearly crumbles at the knee from the weight of the command, her insides squirming.

Harry is between them like a shield before she can noticeably waiver. “Stop being an arse, Ron. It’s not Hermione’s fault your party went badly. It’s been a month, so move on, yeah? We’re meant to be celebrating your brother.”

“Why are you always taking her side?” Ron postures against Harry as Theodore takes hold of her arm, breaking her out of her fawn reaction.

“Because you use your designation to bully witches and I won’t let you do it when I’m around. It’s aggressive and abusive and that’s not what we’re meant to act like as alphas.”

“Yeah, says who?” The red head straightens to his full height, glaring at their best friend.

“Anyone decent,” Theodore grumbles as he guides her around the loveseat, directing her to take their seat as she works through the effects of the command she is feeling as nonchalantly as possible.

Arthur passes her, joining the face-off between alphas to diffuse the tensions. “All done boys. Harry’s right, we’re celebrating your brother today, Ron. You can have this conversation at a different time if it's really necessary.”

Ron grunts in displeasure but listens to his father, stalking off into the kitchen. Arthur nods to their trio as he passes, returning to his seat as Molly instructs George to put on the knit hat he’d just unwrapped.

Harry perches himself on the armrest beside Hermione and Theo takes the second cushion beside her, petting down her curls in comfort. She hyper fixates on the gifts to distract herself from the residual weight of the command given to her. George reaches for the next one and before he can touch the wrapping she finds herself saying, “Luna and Gin send their love. That one’s from them.”

George looks up from the parcel, smiling at her before taking care to unwrap it. It's a photo album of him and his siblings. Ginny had hunted down all the photos she could from their childhoods and put them all in one place for him. It had taken months and was part of a larger project for the family, but that wasn’t ready yet, so she thought this would be good in the meantime.

“Oh,” he breathes, flipping through the photos, laughing at some. “This is really... this is just... it’s—” He wipes at a stray tear, grinning ear to ear.

“You’ve been to see Ginerva and Luna, Hermione?” Molly asks, squinting at her.

Put on the spot she panics, not prepared to lie. “I—just to—”

“When is my daughter bringing me my grandbaby? It's been enough time in private, don’t you think? Obviously you’ve been allowed to see them—”

“No, I...” She struggles to find an appropriate response that doesn’t reveal her exclusive invitation to meet the new family member.

“Well, she’s not made arrangements for me to visit. Her *mother*. Don’t you think that’s just awful? Keeping a witch from her grandbaby.”

Hermione stammers, flustered at being singled out.

“They’re taking a bit longer because of the recent outbreaks of black cat flu, mum,” Percy answers, saving her. “Gin wrote yesterday, the letter was on the table. The baby’s still very susceptible to illness. And with Hermione having had it so recently, they thought it best to miss the party.”

Molly scowls, getting up to search for the misplaced letter, “Well, why didn’t anyone tell me?”

They continue to speak back and forth as George continues with presents, again aided by the present grandchildren. Percy follows his mother to the kitchen, trying to appease her temper.

It's her gift next—muggle joke books and an illustrated manual of several muggle contraptions she thought he might find interesting.

"Wicked," he flips through the manual, showing the kids the pictures. "This is great Hermione."

Smiling, she nods, sitting back into the loveseat a little deeper. All the attention was starting to get to her and she felt about ready to make her excuses, something feeling not quite right. Harry notices, eyeing Theodore over her head. She sets a hand on her knee and shakes her head, but knows immediately he's not going to listen.

They wait until all the presents are finished. Bill and Fleur collect the kids and climb up the creaky stairs to put them down for the night, having agreed to stay over. Harry approaches George, wishing him a happy birthday and friendly hug.

"Thanks mate." George pulls back, eyeing her and Theodore who wait nearby. "You lot off?"

"Work night, do you mind?" Harry asks.

"No, 'course not. Really appreciate you coming," he smiles at them. "Thank you for the gifts, they were wonderful."

"I hope you had a good birthday, George. It was really nice to see you." Hermione tells the wizard, holding her breath for a quick hug goodbye.

"You too, Hermione. The books you chose are great. Mind if I write you with charms ideas?"

"Of course," she tells him, trying to keep her voice from sounding thin in their proximity. Theo goes in for a handshake and she's able to step away, taking a full breath.

As Harry retrieves their robes and George and Theodore chat, Arthur approaches her, keeping a good distance. "Hermione my dear. Feeling better? We were so sorry to hear you'd caught the flu."

"Oh, yes." That's what they'd told people when she was unable to return from her heat on schedule. The recent outbreak worked in her favor. "Not a very fun way to spend a few days, but I've made a full recovery. Just a bit of residual tiredness."

"Good, good. We want you healthy." He tells her sweetly.

"Yes, thank you."

"Here, love," Harry returns, holding her robe up for her to slip into it. Bundling up, she adjusts her curls so they aren't trapped. "Arthur, as always, thank you for having us."

"Oh, of course my boy. You're always welcome—but best you young ones be off. Not the weekend yet."

"Don't remind me," Harry laughs, pulling her under his arm.

Theo comes over, taking his robe from Harry. “Going to pop over to the Leaky for a birthday pint with George and Angie.”

“Sounds good, darling, have fun.” Harry grins.

“You could go too,” she suggests, looking up at him.

He considers it, inspecting her while running it through in his head.

“Why don’t you come, Hermione?” Angelina asks, joining the conversation, George behind her. “Break up the testosterone with me.”

“I... sure.” She finds herself saying for some reason. The witch grins at her agreement. Quickly she attempts to salvage the situation, “But only for one drink—I’ve got an early morning.”

“I’ll convince you otherwise,” the witch claims, tugging Hermione away from Harry, looping their arms. Immediately she’s hit with the reek of beta and she tries not to make a face.

“Let’s clear out then,” Harry smiles, but Hermione can see the tension in him. His eyes don’t leave her.

“I’m coming too,” Ron calls, shucking on his robes at the door.

“Brilliant,” George says, looking around before calling. “Percy, drinks?”

“Not tonight, Georgie. I’m bringing Pen dinner.” Percy escapes the conversation with his mother, coming over to give George a hug. “Happy birthday.”

Hermione continues to breathe shallow breaths, attempting not to choke on the mixing beta scents. She wouldn’t last long like this, or at the Leaky.

“Floo or apparate?” Ron asks, finishing off his current drink.

“There’ll be floo traffic getting into the Leaky this time of night,” Angelina points out.

“Apparation it is,” Ron steps out of the house, disappearing from the porch with a crack.

“Come on Hermione, we can side along,” Angelina offers, pulling her from the house.

“I don’t like side along, I can take myself,” she tells the other witch. Stepping away for a clean breath of night air as the others follow them out.

“Oh, right. I remember that now.” The witch says, smiling sympathetically. “See you there then.”

“Where are you all off to? No goodbye for your mother?” Molly is in the doorway as Angelina disappears.

“We’ll be back in a few hours mum,” George calls, following his witch.

“Have a good night, Molly,” Theodore calls as Harry comes over to her.

“You sure you can handle this? We can go home.”

No. “I’ll stay one drink and leave. And you’ll stay as long as you want.”

“I’ll come back with you.”

“Your choices shouldn’t revolve around me.” She tells him, pulling her wand out as Theodore comes over, showing his equal concern about her going in expression alone.

Harry protests, “Hermione—”

“Bye Arthur, Molly. Have a good night,” she holds up a hand in goodbye before disappearing to Diagon Alley. She lands on the cobblestones, quickly stepping out of the apparition point so someone else doesn’t land on her. Looking around, she already feels out of sorts. Harry and Theodore arrive just after her, flanking her as they catch up with the rest of the group.

“I don’t know about this,” Theodore says, eyeing everyone they pass and the darkened storefronts of the main alley on the way to the Leaky. It hadn’t been her intention to put the alphas on edge about her safety. Or herself. She just wanted them to feel able to participate but they wouldn’t because of her and everything going on.

Hermione can’t lie and say she isn’t nervous about her rash decision but she’s going to stick to it. She’ll just stay a few minutes. No drinking. Quick departure once the others are distracted. “It’s just for a—”

“Hermione!” Angelina calls, turning back and stealing her away from Theodore and Harry again. “We’ve never been out together before. I’m excited!”

Heart leaping, she glances back at Harry and Theo, making sure they’re still close. “I really can’t stay long, Angie—”

“Please,” the witch begs. Her wafting scent alone is nearly overwhelming.

“Just one drink,” Hermione tells her again, holding back a cough.

“Oh, alright. But we need to have a girls night soon! There are so few of us compared to the boys in the family. I’ll convince Penelope and Fleur too. Can’t speak for Gin and Luna with the baby though.”

“That would be nice,” she says, unable to turn her down.

Soon she’s being dragged through the doors of the Leaky and she immediately tenses up, scents foul and alluring assaulting her from every direction. Her head clouds and she follows Angelina obediently through the crowd, bumping and brushing against witches and wizards alike.

They draw attention and a spike of panic shoots through her as she convinces herself they all know. All of them are aware she's an omega.

As she overhears passing conversation, that worry abates somewhat—sometimes she forgets they're famous in the wizarding world. However, between the attention and the scents, she feels her awareness tinging black around the edges and knows this was a mistake. A very dangerous mistake.

“Hermione!”

Her ears ring but she snaps back into focus, finding herself stationary in front of the bar now. “What?”

“I asked what you want to drink!” Angelina shouts over the crowd.

Hermione shakes her head, looking around. “I think I need to leave.”

The witch pouts but gives her a proper look, adopting concern, “You look a bit green actually —”

“I’ve got her,” Theodore comes up from behind. “Need some air, love?”

Hermione nods, knowing he’ll get her out of there. Harry slides in between her and Angelina, making excuses for her, “She has social anxiety since everything. It’s why she doesn’t come out much.”

Theodore leads her away from their group through the crowd, keeping her close to his body. She tries to breathe in only him but it’s impossible and her vision tints again, warning her of impending subspace.

“Theo—” she gasps, afraid. Why had she deluded herself to her ability to be here? Why did she risk it? *Stupid. Stupid. Stupid.*

“It’s okay, we’re almost outside,” he promises. They pass the lines for the bathrooms and push out a back door, escaping. Hermione feels immediate relief as the fresh air meets her lungs and her head clears in a rush. But the sudden shift makes her ill and she releases Theo, scrambling to a nearby bin to be sick. Theodore quickly grabs her loose curls, holding them out of the way as she throws up her dinner.

“Oh, love.”

“I’m sorry,” she says between waves of nausea. “I shouldn’t have—”

“No, no, this isn’t your fault.” *But it is.*

The door opens behind them during her next bout of vomiting, she assumes it’s Harry until a stranger’s voice addresses them. “Hey, is she alright? I was coming up to say hello when I saw you two rush out.”

“We’re all good, thanks.” Theodore says moving in a way she’s sure blocks her from the voyeur, but she doesn’t hear the wizard depart. Hermione tries to get hold of herself, afraid of what she’ll find when she turns around. Theodore holds his handkerchief out to her when she straightens from the bin. She takes it, wiping at her mouth while blinking back tears.

“Hermione?” the voice probes.

Turning into Theodore, needing his protection and support for whatever this interaction will be, Hermione steels herself for a stranger. What she doesn’t expect to find is a familiar face, all grown up. “Neville?”

The boy—man—smiles, cheeks pinking. “Hello Hermione. And Theodore... Its been a few years.”

Eyes roaming, she takes in the wizard. He’s tall and lean, skin tanned from his hours outside, hair neatly cut so it’s not in his eyes. He’s dressed sharply in his undersuit—straight legged brown slacks and a button down shirt with matching vest—despite the Leaky’s casual atmosphere. His sleeves are rolled up to his elbows revealing strong forearms. He smells like earth and tomato plants and sunshine—she realizes he’s an alpha, how she didn’t know that already she doesn’t know.

Her guard remains up, “I thought you were teaching at Hogwarts. Why are you in London?”

“I had a meeting with a Herbology colleague to discuss my book this afternoon. Came out with Dean and Seamus since I was in town.” He explains in the same soft spoken tone she remembers from school. “Thank you, again, for all of the help you are giving me with the manuscript. The references you’ve sent over so far have been really excellent.”

“Oh, of course.” She blinks, taken off guard then remembers her manners. “I thought the chapters you sent me were wonderful. I hope Hogwarts adopts the text to the curriculum once you’re published.”

“That’s very kind of you,” he grins, scratching the back of his head, obviously feeling embarrassed or awkward about the attention. “Sorry to have followed you out here, by the way. I just wanted to make sure you were alright.”

“A bit much to drink,” Theodore says as she responds: “Just overwhelmed.”

“I get that,” Neville takes the double response in stride. “I’m not a big fan of crowded areas myself, find them a bit disconcerting. Especially after a few drinks—in fact I don’t drink anymore. It made me too anxious.”

“That’s quite self-aware,” Theodore comments, but his tone doesn’t match the apparent praise.

“I suppose... Are you coming back in? I’ll buy a round of butterbeers.” He offers kindly, gesturing back over his shoulder to the door. “Might be easier on your nerves.”

She almost says yes for a moment but chokes the word back. That wasn't what she wanted—going back inside was in fact the last thing she wanted right then.

“Not for me, not tonight,” Hermione shakes her head, one hand fisted in the back of Theodore’s robes. What was happening to her? She was still upset with herself for accepting the initial invitation out, was well on her way to exhausted from the unfortunate experiment, and very near the edge of subspace to be in public, especially with an alpha this nearby. “I need to get home.”

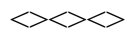
“I understand,” the wizard tells her with a friendly smile. “Can you get there on your own?”

“I’ll bring her,” Theodore says, looking down at her reassuringly.

Her current state in mind, she doesn’t have it in her to refuse the help, and nods. Guilt builds in her chest though—for ruining the night. Looking down at the grimey back alley pavement, she fights tears. “Good to see you, Neville.”

“You as well, Hermione. I hope you feel better. Theodore, get her back safe.”

Theodore’s arm curls her closer. “I will, mate. Enjoy the rest of your visit to London.”



“Theo, I’m so sorry,” Hermione cries as they step out of the floo into her flat. “You should go back to the Leaky. I—”

“I’ll go back once you’re tucked in for bed, yeah?” He tells her, petting down her curls. “Dally?”

The little elf comes out of her closet, following them. “Mister Theo.”

“Bath or shower, love?” he asks Hermione, bringing her to her bedroom, helping her out of her outer robes.

“You shouldn’t have to—” She hiccups, feeling confused and ill at ease despite being home and safe.

“Okay, its alright, Hermione. I think you’re reacting badly to another one of your new potions,” Theodore says, guiding her to the bathroom. “Dally, could you run a bath please?”

The elf begins to fill the tub as Theodore sits Hermione on the loo, getting a flannel from the cupboard and wetting it to wipe at her face.

“I want you to go back,” Hermione tells him, a panicky feeling in her chest. “You should be with our friends. You shouldn’t—”

“I’m going back. We’re just going to get you set for the night first,” he tells her again, rubbing her cheek lovingly.

“Baths is ready,” Dally tells them.

“Thank you,” Theodore glances at the full tub and the steam rising off the surface. “Okay, love. Dally is going to help you into the tub, yeah? And I’m going to go figure out which potion is making you feel like this.”

“I don’t want to feel like this,” she tells him, hands shaking now.

“I know, we’re going to make sure you don’t take it again. Let Dally help you, I’ll be right out in the kitchen.”

“No, you should be at the Leaky—”

“It’s okay, Hermione,” he assures her as he stands, giving her privacy for her bath.

“Please, Theo, I’m ruining it—”

“You aren’t ruining anything, love. Not one thing,” he promises, grabbing the door handle to pull it shut. “Dally’s going to help you now—”

“You’re going to the Leaky?”

“Yes, I’m going to the Leaky,” he tells her, smiling strangely. “Enjoy your bath.”

“Missy?” Dally comes over to her where she sits on the loo as the door shuts behind Theodore. She can’t figure out what’s wrong but something feels wrong. She had done something wrong. A black haze tinges the edges of her vision as Dally makes her stand and disrobe. The confusion sets in more heavily as she sinks into the hot water.

“Dally, I don’t feel well.” She tells the elf, curling over her knees in the tub, her fingers tugging at her hair.

“Dally take cares of missy. No worrying. Missy is safe.” The little elf says moving to sit on the loo, watching over her as she always does.

“I’m not…” Hermione says, losing her focus. The darkness sets in.



“*Hermione, love.*” She hears Theodore calling for her. “*Come out of there.*”

She experiences the sensation of falling, like she’s midair on a broom one moment and it flies out from under her in the next. And then she’s plummeting back to the ground, about to be broken into a million little pieces—

“*Hermione, it’s okay, you’re safe to come out.*” Harry says.

Jolting out of subspace the instant she’s meant to impact the ground Hermione gasps back to consciousness, looking around in a panic.

“Hey, you’re okay. You’re safe, Hermione. You’re home.” Harry tells her as he throws a quilt around her, bundling her up, giving her security. She blinks up at him, taking in her bedroom

and the two alphas in front of her.

“What are you doing here?”

“You’ve had a bit of a night, love,” Theodore says remorsefully.

“Why aren’t you at the Leaky?” she asks. They were meant to be celebrating with George. It was his birthday. She’d ruined it.

“We went to the Leaky, love. And we had drinks with everyone. And we came back here to check on you.” Harry tells her, sounding sincere.

Wrapping herself tighter in the quilt, she gasps, “I ruined it—”

“No, you’re having a bad reaction to a potion, that’s all,” Theodore assures her. “We think we know which one. You won’t have to take it again.”

“George—I didn’t say happy birthday to George,” she shakes her head, horrified.

“It’s okay, Hermione. He knows you wish him a happy birthday. You said it at dinner.” Harry tells her, scooting closer. “How about you lay down, it’s very late. You should get some sleep.”

Her mind is so awake though. “Angelina wants to host a witch night—”

“Nothing to worry about right this moment. You can just go to sleep.”

“But—”

“It’s okay, love. You’re safe.” Theodore coos as Harry helps her lie back, pulling the duvet over her.

“I don’t know what’s going on.” Her cold fingers grab at the nearest hand tucking her in.

“You’re going to sleep.” Harry tells her, kissing her knuckles. “We’ll be right here. You can sleep.”

Everything lives behind a fog in her head. “But something’s wrong.”

“It’ll be better in the morning. *Sleep now, you’re safe.*”

::: ::: :::

Wednesday, April 7, 2004

Draco arrives to a missive waiting for him outside his office. Plucking it out of the air, he brings his things inside and sets down his satchel, unfolding the parchment airplane.

Topside. Noon. - HP

He knows they'd had the list conversation with Granger about two weeks back—the day he'd approached her in the stacks. From Potter's last note instructing him to give her a wide berth, he assumed it went poorly. That she'd reacted badly to him and he was out of the running even though that hadn't been included in the short message.

When he hadn't heard more from the other alpha following his last note, he allowed himself to hope. Potter hadn't instructed him to leave his job or to never speak to the witch of his affections ever again like he sometimes thought would be the case. But this meeting felt like a looming boot, waiting to crush him to the pavement.

Only terror could describe his inner turmoil at the prospect of being cut out of Hermione Granger's life. Worse than the year he shared his home with the Dark Lord waiting to be punished or forced into something he didn't want.

He didn't want to lose her now. Not after everything.

Back to her normal schedule, Granger arrived a half hour after him, Theodore in tow. Familiar with her morning ritual, Draco went to the refreshment trolley to top up his coffee and caught a glimpse of her waiting at the end of the other hall with her teacup as he turned back for his office.

Circe, she was striking —wearing a caramel colored dress today that contrasted her pretty curls and eyes. He savored the vision of her in his mind, trying to commit it to memory in case this was his last day near her.

Shutting himself into his office, he buries himself in work hoping the monotony of his obligations would distract him from the impending meeting. His alpha instincts are a mess, prodding him to go to the witch, to kneel before her and beg for a chance.

But she didn't want an alpha and that would do him no good.

At a quarter to noon, after several hours of unproductive notetaking and archive browsing and staring at ink on pages attempting literacy, Draco grabs his robes and heads topside.

He is first to arrive that afternoon, waiting on the corner where he'd last found Potter. The other wizard emerges from the muggle front for the ministry and quickly joins him on the walk to the park. The silence between them is agony and he can't help his quick pace, needing to get to the park so they can discuss whatever it is—probably a dismissal—Potter wished to speak to him about.

Once the privacy charm is up he stops Potter, facing him, speechless and panicking.

“Why do you look like that? Did something happen?” Potter's eyes widen.

“Did you not ask to see me to tell me Granger has no interest in me?” He hates the whine in his voice.

Potter shakes his head, “No, Malfoy. We've not gotten that far with her yet.”

They both exhale long sighs for different reasons.

“I’ve asked you here to... well, for several reasons.”

“Okay,” Draco nods, following along as they begin the walk around the pond.

“Firstly, the list... she didn’t take it well. We didn’t get past the ‘we’ve made a list’ part of the conversation. None of the alphas we’ve chosen have been mentioned, including yourself.”

“Oh,” he says again. Blood rushing in his ears—so she hadn’t rejected him.

“She’s not in a good way and her outlook on mating is... its more serious of an issue than what we had thought. If what she has expressed to us was genuine we’re going to need to tread very carefully.” Potter pulls off his glasses, rubbing his eyes. “For now we’re trying the potions route, adjusting her regime... it hasn’t worked yet. Everything we’ve tried has bad side effects, and her symptoms between heats haven’t lessened.”

“What side effects?” Part of him doesn’t want to know.

“Confusion, risk taking, and suicidal thoughts so far...”

Draco’s concern for her deepens and he feels powerless to do anything without betraying her wishes. His mind whirls, looking for a solution as Potter continues, slipping his glasses back on.

“Finding an alpha she can trust is the best and safest solution to all of this, but she doesn’t see it that way. She knows she is an omega, and she feels united with that part of herself so intensely she doesn’t think she has any control over her reactions or instincts. She thinks her omega magic takes away her choice. She hates the way she responds to alphas, loathes her obedience and submissiveness.”

“Granger has always been a force to be reckoned with, especially since presenting,” he comments. “Its hard to imagine her not being in control.”

“That’s just the point though, yeah? Hermione knows of her magical aptitude, she understands her power. She thinks its the majority of the reason she’s presented as an omega. But because all recent literature explains how omegas are meant to be broodmares to offspring of unique magical potency, she feels unsafe revealing herself to anyone. She fears her intelligence, wants, and goals will be overlooked by any potential mate, and with the current state of designation law in Britain, I can’t say I disagree. She would be in constant danger of alphas if we hadn’t hidden her from the beginning. She doesn’t have any legal protections except the ones I’ve put in place for her.” Potter scowls. “The potential loss of autonomy over her body and over her future based solely in biology makes her angry and fearful, like her power is useless and the role she is meant to play undervalued. She doesn’t want to be the sexual object of an alpha or the repopulation contingency of the wizarding world. What she wants is to be let alone to live her life as she sees fit. But even if she isolated herself, she’d be incapable of that because—”

“Because of her biological needs.”

Draco is livid hearing all of this. He was aware of some of it, but was disturbed with himself for not considering it where Granger was concerned. He'd always thought her separate from the archaic laws of wizarding Britain because of her status as a war hero and relationship with Potter and the minister. For some reason he'd assumed she'd be awarded protections to ensure her safety but now hearing *this*, her fears become much more real to him. The fact that she even allowed him in the same vicinity as her and that she holds a ministry position with so many alphas working elsewhere in the building was astonishing to him.

He feels sick. "You know I would never take away her choice."

"I know," Potter says, clearing his throat. "I knew when you gave her to me during our escape from your manor. You protected her. You stopped them from hurting her—"

"No, I failed her that day. She was tortured while I watched and—"

"And you stopped it." He clears his throat again, tempering his emotions. "Chances are she would have died if that had gone on much longer. She was only two days into her next cycle following the most brutal heat she's ever—"

Draco flinches, occluding against his memories of her writhing on the ground in his drawing room. And worse, when she stopped reacting to the spell. The idea that she'd gone through that while recovering from an unaccompanied heat was nauseating.

"Malfoy," Potter stops him, expression solemn, "Hermione won't survive many more heats without a mate. And she's prepared to let that happen."

He doesn't mean to growl, but his alpha rises so quickly in protest he can't stop it.

Potter nods, looking away, out over the pond. "We don't know what to do. And with the anniversary coming up later this month... we know she's not going to be swayed easily. It's always a hard time of year for her."

"Why are you telling me this, Potter? How can I help? I won't force her."

"We can't force her." The wizard agrees.

"What about the alpha who sees her through her heats?" He forces himself to ask. It's something he has never wanted the answer to. He didn't want to know how close he was to losing Granger each heat. But now the loss outweighed the alternative. "Would he... would she let him—"

"That's not an option."

Draco blinks in surprise. "He's not on the list?"

Potter hesitates, averting his gaze, "No."

His mind spins, concocting reasons for this choice on the alpha pair's part.

“Malfoy, I’m telling you all of this because I’m out of ideas.” The Gryffindor confesses in defeat. “And I know you care for her, you want the same things my mate and I do—for Hermione to be safe and happy.”

“I do.”

“So help us,” the wizard asks.

He realizes they feel just as helpless as he does when it comes to the witch. He’s sure they’ve explored the possibility of mating her themselves, it was clear there was love between them all. But for one reason or another, Granger had chosen not to do that.

However, she was running out of options. Choosing a mate was now a matter of survival and he could see why she loathed it. Her biology was counting down, forcing decisions from her. Ones that would save her, but forced no less.

“You know how I feel, you know I’d do anything for her.”

“That’s why I’m asking.” Potter agrees.

“Then help me show her—I’m your best option.”

“Even with the list, Malfoy, I think you’re our only option.”

... ..

Sunday, April 11, 2004

Hermione watches the family from the dining table—which had been moved outside for the afternoon—as they help the grandkids hunt around the yard of the Burrow for chocolates and small treasures.

The wizards make a game of finding the sweets and other baubles, ensuring each child gets an equal amount while also snacking secretly.

Ginny carries Thalia all bundled up in her arms chatting with George. Molly had been trailing after her trying to convince her daughter to allow her to hold the infant before finally giving up, focusing on her other grandchildren and scolding the wizards for ruining their impending dinner.

Luna and Fleur share the other two seats at the end of the table, conversing with each other quietly—everyone else out of earshot lest Bill with his werewolf hearing.

Luna sets a hand overtop Hermione’s suddenly, causing her to jump. “Oh, Hermione. I didn’t mean to frighten you.”

“That’s alright. Were you saying something?” She turns away from the festivities, not feeling very festive herself.

“I just asked how you are. We are all a bit worried.” Luna tells her, eyes probing.

She knows Harry and Theodore had informed everyone who knew to be watchful of her in case something happened and they weren’t close enough to run interference or help her. But they must have shared everything that had been happening of late for Luna to ask that.

From anyone else she might have reacted badly to the question, but her fellow omega rarely set her off. Looking at Fleur to include her, knowing she can also be trusted, she smiles sadly, picking at the placemat in front of her. “I’m in a bit of trouble, I think... all the potions we’ve tried so far are only exacerbating my current condition. And the nightmares have been keeping me up like they always do around the holiday which isn’t helping.”

“I’m sure you’re exploring every solution, Hermione, but is there anything we can do?” Luna asks.

Shaking her head, she looks back out at the rest of the family. She had a sinking feeling this might be her last Easter. Theodore catches her eye, raising a brow in question. He’d begun to hover more after her recent bad reaction. She smiles absently, turning back to the other witches. “I’m not sure what to do anymore...”

“Hermione,” Luna murmurs, “You *need* an alpha.”

A tear escapes. “I know.”

“Why don’t you let uz help you find one?” Fleur asks kindly, “Teodore and Harrie have shared with uz—”

“I know you mean well” —she interrupts the witches— “but I can’t have this conversation again.”

“Hermione.” Luna tries to stop her as she stands, making for the house.

Percy looks up from where he and Penelope work on a fruit tart in the kitchen, startled by her entrance, “Hermione? Are you alright?”

Wiping at another fallen tear she forces a smile, making for the stairs, “I just need a minute.”

Climbing the creaky steps to the bathroom, Hermione shuts herself inside and curls up in a ball behind the door, crying into her knees, hair blanketing her.

The longer this went on and the more people who spoke to her about it, the more fearful she became of her next heat. She didn’t want what she went through in the beginning to happen again. Her last heat was awful but still not like those first ones. She knows the only way to make it better is to find an alpha like everyone is telling her.

If Rik and Wilf were right, one of her next heats would kill her if she didn’t employ an alpha’s help and it would be a horrible, painful death. She thought it was the better option but now she doesn’t know. She’s afraid to do it alone and she’s afraid to ask for help.

A knock on the door startles her from her tears and she snuffles, trying to find her voice, “Yes?”

“Hermione?” Ron asks from the other side of the door.

“I’ll be out in a little while,” she tells him.

“No, I uh... I don’t need the loo.” He clears his throat, sounding so like his younger self in that moment. “I saw you come in, just, are you alright? I know its the anniversary so...”

“Mhmm,” she calls, unable to fake her wellbeing any better as she shuts her eyes, remembering their school days, and their war days.

The stairs creak and she assumes he’s left. Instead Harry addresses the ginger, “Hey, I’ve got this, Ron, you can—”

“I was just checking on her,” Ron tells Harry defensively.

“I know. I’m just saying thanks—”

“No, you’re dismissing me. That’s all the two of you have done since the war. I know I messed up back then but you’ve not given me a chance to make up for it. Its Harry, Theo, and Hermione now. No more Ron—”

“That’s not fair, Theo is my mate—”

“And I’m your friend!”

“Please don’t fight,” she asks of them from behind the door. “Ron, I’m sorry you’ve felt left out. I’m sorry for my part.”

“I miss you, Mione.”

Eyes shut, she tries to remember who her friend is past his alpha. “I miss you too, Ron.”

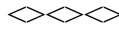
“Can we be friends again?”

“I’d like that.” She tells him, already knowing it won’t be possible. Not unless she’s claimed.

She needed an alpha, Hermione could admit that now. She didn’t want to die in pain and the potions weren’t helping. But he wouldn’t be Ron.

Truthfully she didn’t know who he would be. Finding someone she felt safe with was going to be difficult given the circumstances. And feeling ready for this was going to be even more difficult. But thinking of things like they were her last times had gotten to her. She didn’t want to have lasts yet, she was supposed to get old, she was supposed to fall in love, to have children, to watch Harry and Theodore grow their family. She was supposed to have a life and giving up now wouldn’t do.

So, Hermione was going to ask for help.



“Theo? Harry?” She calls into their bedroom, hearing them in the bathroom.

Harry emerges, wiping toothpaste from his mouth. “Hermione, is everything alright? Was it another nightmare?”

She had left early from the family gathering claiming exhaustion before George’s exploding whizz popper display, insisting that Theodore and Harry stay for the rest of the night and promising to get straight to bed. After a few sleepless hours, she decided to get the conversation over with.

“No, it’s not that,” she tells him as Theodore comes into the room drying his hair.

“Hi love,” he greets her, tossing the towel over the back of the door.

“Will you do something for me?” she asks, feeling anxious and fearful and expectant and exposed.

“What is it?” Harry asks, sounding worried.

“Your list,” she forces herself to say, gulping. Both wizards adopt surprised looks. “I want you to write it on a parchment and give it to me.”

“Hermione—”

“I don’t want to discuss it.” She stops Harry before she chickens out. “I just... can I please have it?”

“Of course, love,” Theo tells her, approaching slowly, hands up. He can tell she’s on her guard and doesn’t want to scare her. “Let me go get some parchment from the study.”

She lets him pass, following after him silently down the hall, Harry trailing behind her. Theodore disappears into the study, she hears scritch on parchment and then he reemerges a few minutes later, list in hand.

“Fold it please,” she stares at the wall, breathing rapidly. He follows instructions and then holds it out to her.

Eyeing the inconspicuous piece of parchment, she slowly reaches out, taking it. “Thank you.”

“If you have questions—”

“I can’t.” She shakes her head, folding the parchment again so it doesn’t accidentally open and reveal the names selected for her to investigate. “Only this tonight. No more.”

“Okay,” Harry whispers from behind her, caressing the back of her head. She turns into him, wide eyed and fearful at this step she’s taken. He pulls her into a hug, continuing to pet down her curls as she tucks close for comfort. “Thank you.”

“I should go,” she whispers against his shoulder, taking a deep breath, melting deeper into him.

“You could stay over if you like,” Theodore offers. “If you don’t want to be alone.”

“I don’t know what I want.” Hermione snuffles, overwhelmed. This was a big decision for her and her brain felt paralyzed by it.

“That’s okay.” Harry reassures her, kissing the crown of her head. “How about you come to bed?”

Hermione agrees, allowing herself to be led back to the bedroom, crawling into the bed on Harry’s side. The wizards finish getting ready for sleep, turning off the lights, placing their wands on the nightstands. Hermione sets the list beside Harry’s wand as he climbs into bed behind her, and Theodore behind him. They pull the covers up.

“Goodnight,” she whispers in the dark.

Harry wraps an arm around her, pulling her close. “Goodnight, Hermione.”

“Goodnight, love.” Theodore says, reaching over both of them.

She’s fast asleep.

Saturday, April 17, 2004

They say their goodbyes to Wilf and Rik as they pull their faces out of the floo call.

Curled up on her cushion in front of the fireplace, she looks over and Theodore and Harry, waiting for them to say something. The brothers had recommended due to the many side effects she’d experienced already when altering her potions, that they take a break to regain a proper baseline. Which meant no more intrusive thoughts which she’d been suffering from the past week. For some reason, the newest potion manifested them in the form of throwing things—vials, teacups, plates, even books. It made for a difficult work week.

“Love, as much fun as dodging your projectiles has been” —she snorts at Theo’s humor—
“I’ll be glad for some peace this week.”

“I’ll be glad to rest my poor arm,” she tacks on, earning herself two smiles. “But you heard Rik, he’s ready to test both your magics and fertility. You should go see him this week, it’s a good time.”

“We aren’t going to leave you here on your own, Hermione. That’s not feasible right now.” Harry argues, laying back and stretching out.

“I’ve been on my own before,” she fights, hating how they put their lives on hold for her.

“Not for more than a day without taking leave, and not with your symptoms.”

“Fine, not during the week then. But it’s only three days. You could leave Thursday night, I’d go to work Friday, and be home for the weekend,” she rationalizes.

“I’m not comfortable leaving you on your own right now either, love,” Theodore joins in, shaking his head. “Under normal circumstances I have complete confidence in you, but it’s not safe for you to be alone until...”

“Until I pick someone,” she looks away from both of them, a tightness moving into her chest.

“Have you read—”

“No, not yet.” Hermione stands, grabbing her cushion, taking it back to the sofa.

“Is there something we can do?” Harry probes.

“You can go get your testing done with Rik.”

“Hermione—”

“He didn’t say you had to go together.” She points out, sitting on the reconstructed sofa.

“Harry, you could go tomorrow even, be back on Tuesday. Theodore could go Tuesday to Thursday. I don’t like you putting your plans off because of me.”

“You’re very important to us, love.” Theodore tells her sweetly.

It doesn’t appease her though, “You’re very important to me—and so is your future family.”

Harry becomes frustrated with her pushing, “We want you here for that future, Hermione.”

“And I will be.”

The ferocity of his response startles her: “Will you?”

... ..

Wednesday, April 21, 2004

Potter had told him when they met in the park before work that Granger had been in possession of the list for more than a week now. But, to his knowledge, she hadn’t yet read it.

It was progress, a step in the right direction for her. But possibly not in his direction—he still didn’t know who else was on the list or if he’d eventually be supplied that privileged knowledge.

In a rush having only returned to London earlier that morning, their conversation was short and the Gryffindor again did not divulge that information. However, now that Potter had

given him the confidence that he was the only apparent choice out of the included names, he just had to wait for her to take the leap.

Draco knew it would be sooner rather than later with her next heat just over a month away. They predicted she'd want to interact with one or two of the alphas under a more private pretense before making her decision. In the instance she picked him out, he'd been rehearsing things he might say to her—ways to confess his feelings. The whole thing made him anxious and excited. He also tried to stay sympathetic to her situation, forcing reality on himself several times a scenario so he wouldn't accidentally overwhelm her. It was a near impossible feat—

“Malfoy?” Director Dekin interrupts his thoughts, pulling him back into the division meeting. “Your brief?”

“Yes, my apologies,” he clears his throat, beginning his monthly update which didn't feel nearly as important as his personal life at the moment.

... ..

Hermione sits on the counter as she watches Harry and Theodore move around the kitchen, putting together dinner for the three of them. Harry had returned from Germany that morning, and apparently the tests beginning the process of finding a surrogate compatible with their magics were more time consuming than difficult or uncomfortable—thus, three days long. Theodore would be going over the weekend for his own testing.

Grimmauld was ripe with their quiet excitement and it made her happy to see them like this.

Sipping on her wine, she watches Harry sidle up behind his mate who stirs the sauce on the stove, wrapping his arms around the other alpha's waist lovingly. She always liked to watch them—their intimacy. Harry had earned this and she was privileged to bear witness to something so honest and real.

Setting down her glass she slips off the counter, walking to the small radio in the corner, turning it on to look for some quiet music. When she finds a good station, she turns back, planning to reclaim her place on the counter.

Harry had other ideas, catching her around the waist and dipping her with a mischievous grin as she squeals, “Dance with me?”

“Harry!” She laughs as he brings her back up and spins her around.

The music gets louder and she glances over Harry's shoulder to see Theodore putting his wand away, grinning at them. “Dance with him, love.”

“Oh, you're incorrigible!” Hermione laughs, throwing her head back as Harry helps her onto his toes—the only way they've ever been able to safely dance due to his god awful rhythm. Bracing her arm on his and grabbing his hand, she lets him strut and lunge her around the kitchen, laughing all the while.

Two songs later, Theodore cuts in, twirling her away until he has her in a familiar position from fourth year, “Remember your steps?”

“Vaguely,” she teases, following his lead as Harry takes over the meal preparations.

They dance, doing their best in the thin pathways of the kitchen as they recreate the Yule ball’s opening waltz to much faster paced music, grinning wildly and breathing hard as the song comes to an end.

Before the next one starts, she escapes for a break and drags Harry over. “Now the two of you.”

Theodore leads again as the music slows down for the next song, holding Harry close as they sway and twirl lazily under each other’s arms.

Watching them has her realizing all over again how much she wanted to be around for these things. Here to see her family happy, to watch it grow. She needed to fight for this.

She needed to read the list.

Thursday, April 22, 2004

~ Charlie Weasley ~

~ Neville Longbottom ~

~ Blaise Zabini ~

~ Draco Malfoy ~

~ Michael Corner ~

Hermione had been pondering the names all night and morning. Some made more sense than others. Some surprised her. And then there was Draco Malfoy.

His inclusion on Harry and Theodore’s list wasn’t unexpected after thinking about things a little while. He’d accommodated all of their requirements for his remaining in the department up to this point, and he was always very respectful to her. He was a strong alpha and looked after her in a way she was comfortable with, backing off when she told him to. He was protective of her, helpful...

When she got into work Draco had been at the refreshment trolley to see her—still keeping his distance like she’d asked of him, but there, stealing a glimpse of her before he retreated back to his office for the day. It made her realize for the first time how often he’d done something like that during his year in the department.

As she browsed the stacks for nothing in particular, she continued to consider him for herself like she was meant to be doing with all of them. The idea of an alpha still made her nervous, but knowing this one set her more at ease. She's had many positive interactions with him in the know. In fact they hadn't had any truly negative interactions since the war ended. Out of all of the names, he provided the least risk, at least to start testing the waters. And she'd thought about him in this context before. Not seriously, but—

Hermione startles as she notices a figure out of the corner of her eye at the end of the aisle and she turns her attention on the stranger who stands, watching her.

Alpha pheromones accompany her next inhale and she goes rigid, heart dropping to her stomach.

Attempting to keep a level head and not give over to her panic, she inspects the wizard more closely, hoping this was coincidence.

His shoulders heave up and down as he takes in larger than necessary breaths and his pupils are blown wide.

He was smelling something. Smelling—

Oh.

She takes a step back.

Merlin and Circe, please, no—

“Omega.”

Chapter End Notes

Well then, I'll just.... be over here. :)

Chapter 8: Chapter Eight

Chapter Summary

An alpha mob, an almost perfect resolution, secret assholes, a rock & a hard place

Chapter Notes

This is the first half of the chapter I have planned, but it's getting a bit long and I decided this was an excellent place to post

Still writing, about to take a supper break, maybe there will be another one soon?

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Thursday, April 22, 2004 cont...

“Omega.”

Hermione reacts, *Petrificus Totalus* rolling off her tongue as soon as her wand is level.

The alpha stranger goes rigid and begins to fall but she doesn't wait to watch his landing as she turns and runs.

He could *smell* her.

Meaning her suppressants were failing. Meaning others would be able to smell her. Meaning the ministry was the very last place she should be. If one alpha had been able to sniff her out all the way in her department, it meant others would.

Alphas, plural— *oh gods*.

She had to get safe. She had to get home.

Making for her office and the illegal emergency portkey obtained for her years ago in case something like this were to ever happen, she tries to keep subspace at bay as her emotional brain works double-time against her. Although her fear is very real, her omega twists it toward petrification, threatening to solidify her limbs and keep her huddled in place until help came—at her core, that wasn't Hermione, and her logical brain told her no help was coming. Heart hammering like hummingbird wings, she runs up the central aisle, her skirt tangling around her legs.

Nearly out of the shelves, she suddenly trips, careening toward the ground. The carpet takes the skin off her knees and hands as her wand goes skittering away and her lungs lose all of her breath, ribs creaking as they impact the ground.

She whines in a new breath, rolling tenderly to a shoulder so she can more easily press up from the ground. On her hands and knees, she quickly looks around for her wand, stomach churning as her anxiety begins to eat at her. *Where? Where are you—*

Sniffing, she freezes, scenting more alphas. Her focus dashes up, surveying the archives for the danger she knows is coming when the lifts chime an arrival.

Nonononononono...

The golden doors open and alphas from a very full carriage clamber out into the bay, gulping great lungfuls of the stale archives—air tinged with her.

Like a doe in headlamps, she freezes where she kneels, all of her fears from these last six years being realized in an instant. It manifests in her body like lead, locking her in place, her omega taking over.

The alphas in the bay begin inching forward, jostling each other with their shoulders and dropping their work possessions, though their collective attention remains on her. Another lift arrives with a chime, startling her out of the trance she'd fallen under due to the intense pheromonal output wafting from the lift bay.

Still, she chokes on the air, a hand going to cover her mouth and nose ineffectively as she watches more and more alphas pour from the lifts, putting her pursuers firmly into double digits.

Focusing the best she can on the posturing alphas, trying to take small inhales as the crowd meets the first step down—lingering there in a standoff with her—Hermione tries to sort out something to do.

Like prey, she moves very slowly, making sure not to retreat any further away than she is now as she shakily gets to her feet lest she trigger their impending stampede for her.

Instinct begs to take control of her, muscles coiling to run. Even her omega knows this many alphas is dangerous, no matter how much she needs one. Her mind quiets to one thought: *get somewhere safe*.

One of the wizards is too eager and pushes, causing a cascading motion side to side as they jostle and elbow and strike one another, their instincts taken over, pushing them toward a frenzy—over her.

It was only a matter of time before that tension broke. It could go one of a few ways.

An alpha might attempt to get ahead of the others in a play to steal her away. With so many alpha wizards, and a few witches now too, present, that plan would never succeed and would more than likely bring Hermione harm.

Another possible outcome would be dueling and physical altercations between the crowd until only a few alphas remained, at which point, one or several would attempt to stake a claim on her. And though two dozen alphas wouldn't cooperate where an omega was concerned, two or three might if it meant getting the opportunity to rut her. But, with so many of them given over to their alpha magic already, she had no chance of escaping their battlefield unscathed if she waited for them to act. She would be harmed even if they didn't mean to.

Which meant she would need to act first, leaving her with two options.

The first: Break their standoff somehow and find a safe place to endure the conflict, then, defend herself against the remaining alpha or alphas who would be the strongest of the group magically and or physically—and, to be successful, in the fray, she would need to retrieve her lost wand, and avoid any alpha command, and keep her head with all the pheromones already affecting her at distance, and hold off her omega magic, and be able to get back to her office before more alphas came searching for her, which suggested sealing the lift bay or banking on luck that no one else would arrive.

Another lift chimes, making her flinch. The alpha noise grows in volume and one takes a step down, not yet charging. Hermione mentally fights her every fiber to keep her feet planted in place and not retreat until she'd decided.

The second option of hers: Run and hope she could get to her office and portkey before any of them caught up to her—an unlikely thing seeing as they were between her and the hallway she needed to get down to do this.

If she could alert someone, a coworker, Theodore, anyone—

“Hermione!” Theodore suddenly shouts as if she'd summoned him, running out of the hall to her office, not yet sensing the alphas. Unintentionally he breaks the standoff between her and the alpha mob, pushing her instincts to make the decision for her.

Scurrying into the bookshelves, she attempts to escape.

Only, she doesn't run towards Theodore and her office like she planned, favoring the opposite direction entirely.

The alphas flood the archives after her.

“Oh bloody—” Theodore curses somewhere behind her, and suddenly she hears the horrible smack of bodies colliding and a bookshelf toppling as a spell strikes the alpha collective, giving her a much-needed lead.

Making use of the advantage, Hermione darts between a gap in the shelves barely large enough for her in time to enter the hall to the wing of offices she very rarely had reason to visit. As she runs past and the mob chases after her, noisy as erumpents, doors begin to open.

She continues to race along, ignoring the audience as her brain scrambles to catch up and provide direction to safety. Eventually, the alphas would overtake her. She wasn't faster.

So she needed somewhere to go. Somewhere safe.

Unable to think beyond her panic though, her instincts are left to navigate on her behalf.

Pinpricks spread through her body and her chest burns against the exertion. It won't be long now until her omega is fully in control, her mind unable to cope with the looming danger of the mob hunting her.

Fingers brush at the small of her back, prodding her terror and she takes a sharp turn, nearly losing her footing as she bounces off the wall but continues on. The alphas go skidding past the hall and pile up on each other, giving her another lucky lead.

Still, it didn't alter the fact that fleeing wasn't sustainable. Her vision darkens with the threat of subspace.

Then all of a sudden there is a wizard in her path, nose turned up.

She gasps, barrelling into him.

Before she can react, she is spun around and pulled into the office, the door slamming in the face of the closest alpha as wards come down hard around the room.

Draco.

The seclusion of his office is immediately relieving and she sags against the wizard, attempting to catch her breath.

Pheromones assault her senses on her next deep inhale causing her to recoil from him, backing away in fear.

Draco's pupils engulf the grey of his irises as he experiences her unsuppressed scent.

"Please." Hermione's back hits the wall, hands raised as she watches the aroused alpha stalk her with his eyes.

Something impacts the wards and the door just beside her rattles violently. She shrieks, ducking to the ground in fright, hands scrambling to cover her mating glands at the base of her throat in a pathetic attempt to protect them.

A sob bursts from her.

"Fuck," Draco mutters, stepping toward her.

"No! Keep away!" she begs, alerted to his approach by stirring air.

Scrambling into the nearest corner of the office, she curls up as small as possible, her panicked breaths rebounding from the wall as she wraps her body in her arms, pressing as hard as she can against the solid borders of the room.

"Granger," he follows.

“Please,” she sobs again, shaking furiously, palms cupped around her glands.

At first touch she flinches, then realizes it isn't hands grabbing her, or even flesh. Heavy fabric drapes around her cowering figure and she opens her tearful eyes to see—fine outer robes.

Blinking at him through her tears, Hermione is met by the grey-eyed wizard she'd become familiar with, a modified bubble head charm clinging to his shapely jaw. “Hey there, Granger.”

“Draco...” she croaks.

“It's alright, you're safe,” he tells her as he tucks the extra material of his robes between the wall and her body. “Are you hurt?”

She shakes her head.

“Good, that's good.”

“My suppressants are failing,” Hermione tells him on a whimper, shrinking back under his robes. There's a flash of emotion from him but he schools it. Unsettled, however, she prods. “What is it?”

His clear eyes glance away and then back, seeming remorseful. “It's not—I don't think it's your suppressants, Granger. You smelled... like you're breaking through.”

“Breaking through... You mean heat?”

Heart clenching, she pulls the scent gland in her wrist to her nose, taking deep breaths. Though she isn't very sensitive to her unsuppressed smell having had few chances to actually learn it, she picks out the ripeness. A thick, sweet, lush advertisement of her coming fertility. Something to taunt alphas, draw them to her—

“No. Nonono—”

“Hey—”

“It's too soon!” She shakes her head, fingers pressing into her trembling lips, stoppering the sobs eager to burst out. “I'm hardly 30 days into this cycle. I can't—”

“I know,” he tries to calm her.

“I can't be here.” Locking gazes with the wizard, blinding fear coursing through her, “I need to get home.”

The office door rattles violently again and she lets out a low keen, fingers going to her hair, gripping the curls. Instinct pushes her to shift forward into the hovering alpha. She wants his protection, his comfort, but isn't sure how to ask for it.

“Shh,” he coos for her benefit, scooting towards one wall so she doesn’t feel as cornered by him. “You’re doing so well. I’m not going to let anything happen to you.”

Unable to resist, Hermione shifts until she’s curled into the alpha’s side, taking the robes with her. She keeps her hands to herself and thoughtfully positions her glands where they can’t be easily contacted.

Draco tenses, keeping himself very still until she settles against him. Her next request comes out as a whine, but she doesn’t have it in her to care, “Please don’t let them ha—have me.”

A rumble grows in Draco’s chest and he carefully loops his arm around her, “No one will touch you.”

They both fall quiet, Hermione relaxing into the contact and his reassurances as she begins to calm her mind and regain her ability to think.

The situation was more dire than she originally thought.

Not only had she been found out, but her heat was more than a month early. She’d only just begun thinking about her options—the list—and now it didn’t matter. There wouldn’t be a choice. She would take an alpha, or an alpha would take her, or she would most likely die. And she would be forced into that reality as soon as someone broke into the office, or they broke out. Or, alternatively, she would be arrested for concealing her designation all these years and she’d be punished.

Tears drip off Hermione’s chin as her thoughts continue to churn round and round.

... ..

Doing his best to keep his breathing even and his heart from breaking out of his chest, Draco holds the frightened witch against him, working to reign in his own feelings. There were many to wade through before he could trust himself to act.

When he’d first scented her he thought his mind might have been playing tricks on him. He knew that smell, it came to him in dreams. Tantalized. Electrified him from the inside out with even the barest tinge in a breath. It was heady and warm. Honeyed. It bled into him, staining his focus until it was all there was—her sterile blockers diluted to an aftertaste.

Hearing a commotion, Draco knew it couldn’t all be in his head.

As soon as he stepped into the hallway to investigate, there she was, crashing into his arms and in the next heartbeat, safely inside of his office. His pulse jumped and he savored the taste of her in the air, eyes shutting as he inhaled. The experience is pure bliss. But the fear souring the air alongside his drug snapped him out of his hazy stupor.

Tracking her with his eyes as she retreated, her shoulders hit the wall and reddened hands held aloft to deter him, his insides clenched—wizard fighting instinct. When the wards were impacted and she screamed, his blood ran like ice and he regained control, wand in his hand

one moment, bubblehead charm cast the next to filter out the temptation of the witch trapped inside his office with him.

Clearheaded, he set out to address her cowed figure in the corner of the room, grabbing his outer robes from the rack as he passed in a moment of genius.

Settling her came more easily than expected.

Now, her trembling form tucked up next to him, his thick robes cushioning between them, Draco fought for the tact and cunning alumni of his house so often boasted.

They needed to secure her, quickly. His office would do for now, but his wards were just above standard, and he hadn't the time to put up proper ones before the witch's impending heat would be due. Which brought about yet another conflict. The omega witch was in the precursor to heat, and by the few breaths of her he'd indulged in, it was progressing rather quickly—at least to his knowledge.

It would be best to remove her from the ministry entirely before she was forced to make any decision about her feelings for him or who she wanted to help her through this unexpected biological event. Not to mention she was in the most danger here. Alphas and legal repercussions waiting beyond his door.

Locked in this office, however, there was a risk in any plan he could enact.

As the wards and office door are tested yet again and the witch flinches, whimpering, he takes a fortifying breath.

“Granger,” Draco starts carefully, eyes tracing her profile from above. “We need to get you out of here.”

... ..

Hiccupping a breath, Hermione nods, sitting up a little bit from him. “I have a portkey in my office. I was trying to get there but I panicked and ran instead.”

The wizard shifts, his gaze holding her, “Ran *here*? ”

“Just somewhere safe...”

She realizes, despite everything, that she feels safe where they are—with Draco. Her considerations from earlier come back to her. If she had to choose an alpha right this moment, she thinks she would be most comfortable choosing—

A glowing stag patronus bounds through the closed door, inspecting them a moment before her best friend's voice comes in a breathless, panicked drawl, “Hermione, we're coming, love. Just hold on. I'm coming.”

The message finishes, the stag dissipating in a whisp of light. Hermione lets out a sigh of relief, leaning back into Draco. “It's Harry's.”

The wizard nods, readjusting his arm around her again, his big hand splayed on her hip, holding her close. “We’ll wait for Potter then. The office will hold until the hall can be cleared.”

“Thank you for helping me,” she whispers.

“Always,” he breathes, chin resting on top of her curls. She can tell he means it.

The anxiety brewing in her belly calms and she shuts her eyes, ready to wait this out.

“Do you want to send Potter a patronus back?” Malfoy asks quietly a few moments later.

“Oh,” she blinks, “I can’t. I’ve lost my wand.”

“Where?” he questions.

“The archives, I tripped and lost hold of it,” she tells him, splaying her raw palms up in front of them, showing him the carpet burns.

“I thought you said you hadn’t been hurt?” She can tell he’s displeased and her omega squirms. His free hand cups both of hers from beneath, bringing them slightly higher to inspect. “You’ll need a bit of burn paste, I might have some in my desk.”

Not wanting to move, she shakes her head, leaning more heavily into him. “It can wait.”

“If that’s what you want.” He agrees.

“Draco?” she looks up at him, head pillowed against his shoulder.

“Yes, Granger?” His grey eyes watch her tenderly.

“Can you send Harry a patronus? Let him know I’m safe?”

He winces, fighting a frown. She nearly pulls away, thinking she’s said something wrong. “I’ve never been able.”

Embarrassed by her assumption, she offers a small smile as consolation, “That’s alright too.”

Draco glances back at her, “Sorry.”

“Don’t be.”

Regarding each other quietly for a long while, Hermione explored the wizard’s expression. The same attention reciprocated, she smiles shyly, heart beginning to race for other reasons than her current predicament.

Before long there are other sounds from the hall than the alpha mob and their breaking and entering attempts. Voices shout, spells ricochet, bodies fall, and Hermione shrinks closer to her protector. It's another quarter-hour at least as voices heave and ho over moving the

unconscious or restrained alphas from the archives to the lifts and then onto the detainment center on the reverse floor of the courtrooms.

As it begins to quiet, Draco perks up, glancing at the door. “To your office once it’s safe?”

Hermione nods.

He helps her to stand.

On her feet, Hermione fastened his massive robes properly, cocooning herself in the warmth, weight, and aroma of the wizard—drowning some of her own allure in his comforting scent. He carefully helps her untuck her curls, before directing her to the rear of the office behind his desk, then placing himself between her and the door, wand drawn. They wait.

Hurried steps and equally as hurried knocking come, “Hermione?!”

Harry .

Draco glances at her and she nods, even as her fear and panic creep back in.

Coaxing the door open, the wizard stands at alert, stepping forward to meet Harry at the wards as he glances past him to either end of the hall, scanning for danger. “Malfoy, let me —”

“Why are there aurors out there?” he looks down at her best friend, his larger frame blocking the doorway.

“Let me in and we’ll discuss it.” Green eyes find her from behind the wards.

“It’s okay,” Hermione calls, trusting Harry. Draco casts a bubblehead on the other wizard then shifts to the side, allowing him past—going as far as to pull the door shut to keep out unwanted eyes and ears.

Once through the magical barrier, Harry rushes to her, pulling her into a fierce hug by the waist, keeping his face far from her glands. “Are you alright, love? Were you hurt?”

“Take me home please?” she begs, gripping him back. “I’m going into heat, Harry, I need to go home.”

“It’s going to be okay.”

He sounds strange. Hermione pulls away warily. “What is it?”

“I—” Harry’s face pinches, he struggles for words.

“Harry, I can’t be here,” her tone is again a whine, but she needs him to understand.

Draco approaches from the other side of the desk, “Potter?”

He looks between them, expression guilty. “Hermione, love, I need you to take deep breaths.”

She retreats from him a step. “Why?”

“She isn’t allowed to leave, is she?” Draco asks, voice grave.

A spear of panic lodges itself under her ribs at the idea.

Refusing to glance away, Harry nods, confirming Draco’s guess. “Because of the frenzy, too many people have found out. We’ve been summoned to the—”

“No.” Her instincts urge her to run again and she backs away, tripping past the desk chair in the process causing both alphas to jut their arms out to her in aid though neither is close enough. She recovers on her own, eyes flitting between the wizards and the door.

Harry comes forward, hands up in a no-harm fashion as she continues away from him. “He won’t do anything. You’re a member of the Potter family, the ministry has no say over you. We made sure of it. Kingsley has to address it to keep up appearances is all. I’m sure of it. In fact, he might just smuggle us out through his floo—”

“I need to go home,” she reiterates, vision tinged black with the sudden threat of subspace. Letting her guard down had been a mistake, she was wrong to have felt safe.

“You will. We’ll get you safe in time—”

“Please, don’t do this to me,” she rounds the desk away from the advancing alpha.

“Love, they won’t let us leave—”

She shakes her head, curls scattering around her shoulders, “My portkey—”

“Theo grabbed it,” Harry tells her. “I checked when I first got down here. He was taken with the other alphas when the aurors rounded the mob up. It’s gone. We don’t have another way out.”

“No,” she sobs, cornering herself again by accident, breaths becoming labored.

“Hermione—”

... ..

“Far enough.” Draco steps into Harry’s path, halting his progress and protecting his witch once again. “You’re scaring her.”

Potter tries to step around him, but he doesn’t allow it. “Malfoy, we need to get her out of the ministry before—”

“I know that.” He nods, not moving from his sentry position in front of Granger as her breathing evens behind him, letting him know she’s calming down on her own. “So tell me

with absolute certainty that you trust the minister with Granger's safety."

The Gryffindor stammers, "I—"

"He's an unmated alpha," Draco adds.

"He's an Order member as well. And he's been a friend to us over the years."

"You know beyond any doubt that he's on our side then?" He steps into the other alpha, backing him up to show dominance, to show he won't be deterred. "I won't risk her."

Green eyes harden, "I won't let anything happen to her—"

"Something is already happening to her!" Draco barks, unable to control his alpha magic from rising.

... ..

There's a knock on the door and they all tense, Hermione's muscles threatening to snap her bones with how rigid she's become. She wanted to be anywhere but here, to be anyone else in the world.

"I'll get it," Harry says, breaking the standoff between himself and Draco.

The alpha in front of her sags, a hand raking through his white hair as he turns to look at her, checking on her.

Door opening, Harry addresses the individual outside. Hermione is unable to see them from behind the door.

"Auror Potter, you're out of time. The minister has authorized me to take down the wards on this office to retrieve the omega if you do not cooperate immediately by exiting. Should I be forced to intervene, you will be detained alongside the other alphas."

"We're coming," Harry tells the Cursebreaker quickly, looking around the door to Hermione, eyes pleading. "Please, love, trust me."

Looking at the hand proffered to her, she fights tears but nods, slinking out of the corner. Before taking her best friend's hand, she gives Draco a long look, feeling as if she's making a mistake.

"Hermione?" Harry draws her attention. She places her palm in his, eyes falling to the ground as she's pulled out of hiding and towards the wards. The omega part of her begs to stay where she feels safe—with Draco. Beta witches and wizards, many of them aurors, wait for them in the hall as she is led out and she shies away behind Harry under the attention, insides churning and not just from the intense smells of the crowd.

An Unspeakable waves their wand at her and she feels the weight of a containment spell settle over her. "That should conceal your pheromones, Omega."

Being addressed as such nearly sends her spiraling as she tugs back, retreating for the office.

Harry stops her, looping an arm around her waist. "I've got you. It's alright."

"Harry." She locks gazes with him, her hands fighting his hold of her. "Please—"

A deep rumble comes from behind them and aurors turn their wands on Draco.

"Stay out of this Malfoy," one says.

"I've got you," Harry assures her again as he scoops her up into his arms.

Hermione locks eyes with an intense grey over Harry's shoulder, drawing comfort from him as she curls as small as she can in her best friend's arms.

She wants to be back in the office.

"This way," someone instructs, and Harry follows their escort, carrying her away.

:: :: ::

Draco waits only as long as it takes for them to get to the end of the hall before stalking them out, attempting to remain unnoticed by the aurors lest he's detained for his efforts. When they reach the main archive, he turns into the shelves, listening for the lifts. Instead, he can hear Granger crying softly.

It takes everything inside of him to keep from bursting into the bay to rescue her but knows it would most likely not go in his favor. Seven aurors, an unspeakable, a cursebreaker, alphas, and several floors between them and escape. The portkey was their best chance, and without it, the odds were stacked against them.

Loathe as he was to admit, putting their faith in Shackbolt was the best option.

To distract himself from the distressed witch as they wait for the lift, he turns to the archives.

Whispering, he summons Granger's missing wand to him. It comes rolling along the carpeted ground, stopping only once it hits his dragonhide Oxfords. Bending as the lift chimes, he pockets it and creeps to the end of the bookshelf, catching Potter's eye.

As inconspicuously as the Gryffindor can manage, he holds up all ten of his fingers, conveying their destination as the golden cage rattles shut on their entourage.

As they zip away, Draco runs into the bay, calling a carriage for himself to follow.

:: :: ::

Entering the interrogation room they'd been led to, Harry jerks, startling her from where she'd long tucked herself in. "Theo!"

"Haz!" The wizards come together around her, foreheads meeting lovingly.

Reassured of each other, they tune back into the present situation, letting Hermione down on her own two feet. She melts into Theodore's chest as he checks on her, apologizing for how things had gone in the archives.

"It's okay," she murmurs, dazed.

It was taking half her focus to keep out of subspace, her nerves frazzled. Beneath the containment spell, she was becoming overstimulated, the magic prodding her increasingly tender body, brushing against her glands uncomfortably. She pulls away, rubbing her wrists against her stomach beneath the oversized robes in an attempt to comfort herself. Both wizards do her the favor of ignoring this, eyes glancing away as her attention wanders.

Harry moves in for another embrace given the opportunity, kissing his wizard lovingly and drawing comfort from him before whispering. "Any chance you still have the portkey?"

Theodore shakes his head, frowning. They both look at her now and she knows she must appear lost and out of it by their expressions.

Reaching up to unfasten his robes, Theo beckons her to him. "Come here, love."

Without really deciding to, she obeys, standing before him as he loops his robes around her on top of Dracos, weighing down the containment spell in a way that provides relief.

"How are you feeling?" he asks of her, lifting her curls briefly to check how protruded her mating glands are becoming.

"Unwell," she surmises, not feeling any more verbose than that just then. She was well on her way into the emotional fluctuations that came with the first day of her—typically three-day—preheat. It was becoming clear she was progressing much more quickly than she would be normally.

The door opens again behind them and Kingsley Shacklebolt comes in, a handkerchief pressed over his mouth and nose until he erects an additional ward between their sides of the room, placing himself down at the table before them. Hermione watches as his eyes rake her up and down with interest, and she shies behind Theodore who is closest to her.

Harry steps toward the minister, "Kings—"

"Please take your seats, all of you," the alpha wizard asks, gesturing to the three empty chairs across from him. Theodore and Harry sink down on either side of her. The positioning does little to soothe her and she tries to shrink as small as she can into her layers of robes and now messy curls.

"Hello, Hermione." The elder wizard smiles at her, his attention suddenly predatory. If she were able, she would apparate home on the spot and layer her wards until they were so thick they became visible—impenetrable.

Theodore tries to get things moving, "Minister. Hermione isn't safe here. We need to get her home as soon as—"

“Miss Granger, are you aware of the laws regarding omega citizens of the British wizarding world?”

Hermione flinches, “Y-yes.”

“Then you are aware of the Designation Statute that requires of-age witches and wizards to correctly identify their designations to the ministry.”

A tear drips down her cheek, but she nods.

“What designation did you report to the ministry, Miss Granger?”

“Kingsley—”

“Not now, Mister Potter. I’ll speak to you next.”

“They weren’t aware,” Hermione lies on behalf of Harry and Theodore, heart thundering against her ribs.

The minister laughs, his grin all sharp teeth and glaring eyes, “If you expect me to believe that, omega—”

Hermione can’t help the whimper drawn out of her, her ears ringing and vision darkening.

Both Harry and Theodore jump to her defense, the noise in the room rising as the three alphas shout at one another.

Aurors are quickly called in and all of a sudden Theodore is being hauled away, out of the room.

Screams rise in protest and she realizes they’re her own as Harry punches the nearest auror, knocking him to the ground in his attempt to get to his mate. All she can do is watch helplessly, hands rising to cover her ears, tears streaming down her cheeks.

“You bastard!” Harry snarls at the minister when the aurors retreat with Theodore in tow, door snicking shut, silencing their missing third.

“Shall I have you put in holding as well, Potter?” Kingsley threatens.

“No!” she cries, gripping Harry’s closest arm, her nails digging into him. “Stop it. Leave them alone.”

“Sit.” The minister commands Harry. Once he is settled into the chair, Kingsley turns his gaze on her, steepling his fingers. “You’ve broken the law, all three of you.”

“Harry and Theo—”

“Let’s not spout untruths now,” the minister stops her.

Hermione’s mouth snaps shut, her chin trembling.

“You will need to take an alpha. I’ll assume you do not have one seeing as you do not wear a mating mark on your neck. Is this correct?”

“I... I don’t.”

“Good,” he clears his throat, leaning back in his seat, his blue paisley robes hanging off his shoulders in thick swaths like curtains. “If you weren’t about to begin heat, I would arrange something more formal. As it is, the ministry keeps a list of alphas. I will contact one on your behalf—”

“Who Hermione takes as her alpha is not the choice of the ministry,” Harry butts in, his arm crossing in front of her. She holds it like a lifeline, fears turning her stupefied.

Kingsley rebuts, “Muggleborn omegas with no relations in our community capable of negotiating on—”

“Hermione is my responsibility,” Harry insists.

The minister frowns. “Not legally.”

Harry’s muscles clench and unclench beneath her touch as his anger grows. “I have bound her to my family’s magical line. It is my right as Lord Potter to make these decisions for her.”

Kingsley pales, his eyebrows furrowing before he can school himself.

Harry continues. “As her lord, she is mine and this is no longer a ministry issue.”

“You have still broken the law, Potter. War hero or not,” Kings’ palm smacks the table and she jumps.

Harry’s rising from his seat again, even as she tugs him back. Kingsley mirrors him.

“Hermione should be allowed to choose who—”

“She is an omega!” The minister sneers. “It is her purpose to—”

“Her purpose is whatever she makes it!”

Her next tug brings his bottom back to the seat of his chair.

Kingsley huffs for a moment before fixing them with an ugly glare, looming above them. “Concealment and abetting are punishable offenses. I cannot let your willfully dangerous actions go unanswered. You are facing serious consequences.”

“The public would never support your putting me in Azkaban, Kingsley. I’d serve days at most.”

“You are correct, Potter, but your mate is not afforded the same immunities, now is he?”

Harry goes rigid, a curse on his tongue, magic swelling beneath his skin despite being wandless. Hermione squeezes Harry's arm before he can do anything, ready to accept her fate in their defense. She couldn't let anything happen to him or Theodore.

"But," the alpha continues, drawing her tearful gaze. "Because of our history and the deeds you have both performed on behalf of the British wizarding world, I will provide you with two options."

"What are they?" she asks meekly.

"Hermione." Harry shakes his head in warning.

"I can arrange for alphas present in the ministry today to be taken to the courtroom. You will be given the opportunity to interact with them for a short time before you will be expected to make a decision. He or she will see you through your heat. And that will be the end of it."

Hundreds of alphas. She'd be overwhelmed, exposed. If she could stave off subspace long enough to choose it would be a miracle. But it would be a sort of choice.

"The second?" she snuffles.

"Allow me to select an alpha on your behalf—I advise you to submit to this. The alphas I would pick from would be able to provide you with a good life. You would have freedoms uncommon to omegas."

"Meaning they've given the ministry money," Harry interprets.

"Many are generous to the ministry and its interests."

"If she doesn't choose?" Harry prods.

"In that case, both you and your mate will go to Azkaban, Potter, and I will select an alpha on her behalf regardless." The minister laces his fingers over his stomach.

So he was only providing the allusion of choice.

But if she didn't agree, Harry and Theodore would be punished.

"The first," Hermione tells her former ally, resigning herself.

Both alphas look at her, one half-pleased and one devastated.

"I will go see about arranging things." Shacklebolt leaves, and the door snicks shut.

"Hermione," Harry reaches for her but she turns away, unable to comfort him and keep herself together. "Hermione, I am... I am so sorry."

In fact, she isn't able to do either.

Chapter End Notes

I feel like a parent who keeps getting begged "Just one more chapter! pleaseeeeeee!" and I keep having to tell my kids bedtime (good feeling lol)

I'm so excited for the next few chapters hehehehehehehhe

lmk what you think!

and if you ask for updates in the comments, I will :(you. please don't, I'm working as fast as I can

Chapter 9: Chapter Nine

Chapter Summary

The spectacle

Chapter Notes

A little balm for your suffering *smooches*

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Thursday, April 22, 2004 cont...

Marched to Courtroom 10 by several aurors, Hermione watches as Kingsley breaks off ahead of them, his robes flapping in his hurry as he barks orders to those wrangling the flooding of alphas from the rapidly arriving lifts. Witches and wizards of all sorts flow past their approaching group and into the courtroom. By the sounds echoing into the hall, there are already an overwhelming amount waiting beyond the double doors—it seemed every alpha present in the ministry was being rounded up.

She should have never agreed to this.

Her entourage slowly comes to a stop, waiting for the rest of her potential mates to file into the room where she would decide her fate—or, more likely, fate would decide for her. The aurors fall into rank to better conceal her from the passing alphas. The auror manhandling her less than enthused best friend appearing uncomfortable treating his superior and the hero of the wizarding world as such as he's forcibly shuffled in the convergence.

Harry's fingers brush her elbow, startling her from the full hallway ahead of them. She glances at him, knowing the pheromones must be thick based on how tense he's become and the intense focus he has.

Before they had left the interrogation room, the containment spell upon her had been reapplied just in case, and she was now thankful for it even if it was like itchy wool on bare skin. Though it didn't bring her comfort exactly, it helped keep thoughts of what the alphas might do were they able to smell her at bay—much needed as she prepared to face them.

“That's plenty, don't let any more down,” Kingsley orders those managing the lifts, entering the courtroom after the last of the arrived alphas. His voice booms, echoing in the hall, “Take your seats!”

“This way Potter,” the auror policing Harry says, leading him by the bicep. He gives her one last watery look before disappearing inside. The double doors shut behind him just as Kingsley begins to address those gathered, voice carrying but words indiscernible.

Hopelessness overcomes her as she’s left among strangers and her lungs constrict. She sobs, pressing a trembling hand to her lips. The wizards and witches around her flinch, guilty and uncomfortable. One has tears in her eyes as she steals a glance at her.

“Please,” she whispers to no one in particular, desperate. “Please.”

The double doors open once more and a wizard holds it, waving her inside. Her feet are cemented in place until someone’s hand gently prods her forward.

Keeping her eyes down and hands fisted in the layers of robes around her, she enters the courtroom, directed to the dais where the accused and criminals stand for trial. Without looking up she feels the heavy weight of the hundreds of alphas’ gazes on her, their shuffling in the risers and quiet rumbles of interest carrying down to her as the Unspeakables recruited to the spectacle follow her a step behind.

“Miss Granger,” one whispers quietly to her, “We will erect a ward around you to maintain a boundary. No one will be able to get to you, but you also won’t be able to leave.”

Like a zoo animal in a cage, she thinks.

Hermione feels herself dying as she steps onto the raised floor at the center of the courtroom. Her heart stutters to a standstill and the room spins as the Unspeakables make quick work of a ward that shimmers a milky white in a dome around the dais.

Officially trapped, she feels almost crippled.

“Miss Granger,” Kingsley calls to her, and she steels herself, working herself up to raising her eyes from the floor. “Omega Granger, look at me.”

Whimpering, she does, attention getting caught on the many alphas as she slowly finds Kingsley at the pedestal of Chief Warlock, a place of distinction he’d claimed for himself to view the performance. Every bit of the first dozen or so benches are filled with alphas, every single eye in the room on her. Including Harry and Theodore’s, each to one side of the Minister for Magic, flanked by aurors to prevent any intervention and to remind her of the threat of their incarceration.

She glances at Harry, regret heavy in her chest. He had tried to get her to talk to him while they were kept in the interrogation room for the near hour since her hand was forced, but she hadn’t been able to. They spent the better part of their remaining time together in silence, her head leaning lightly on his shoulder. It hits her all at once now that if she chose wrong, that might be her last memory with him—an alpha was entitled to keep their omega however they pleased.

“Miss Granger, discard the additional robes you’ve acquired,” Kingsley instructs, hands gripping the carved edges of his vantage point.

The idea of further exposure leads her to shake her head.

“You will obey,” Kingsley tells her, lifting a few fingers and she notices the aurors restraining Theo adjust their grips on him. A wand pressing into the side of his neck, causing him to wince.

Heart stuttering, clumsy fingers work on the fastener of Theo’s robes first, letting them fall, and then Draco’s.

As soon as the heavy fabrics fall away, the hairs all over her body raise and she tenses, arms coming around her middle, shoulders curling.

“You have one hour,” Kingsley tells her, producing an hourglass and setting it in front of himself. The sand seems to race into the lower glass orb.

Feeling small but wanting to be smaller yet, she steals one last glance at Harry and Theodore before turning to face the rest of the courtroom, eyes jumping around the rows and faces, unable to focus on just one witch or wizard for very long.

Entirely unprepared for this and feeling the symptoms of her preheat ebb and rush through her, she pants in small panicked breaths, squeezing her eyes shut. The containment spell was itchy and claustrophobic, it prodded her unease and her fingers dug into the flesh they held on their own.

How would she ever do this? How could she ever choose? There were too many. No one familiar. No one safe. But she has to try to fulfill her obligation for the sake of Harry and Theodore.

Forcing herself to meet the gazes of the prospective alphas again, Hermione resists the urge to cower.

Brown.

Green.

Hazel.

Brown.

Brown.

Blue.

So many.

Witches and wizards.

Young and old.

Who knew she was an omega.

They all wanted her.

Wanted to mate her.

To keep her.

Backing away from those she faces as she begins to shiver, Hermione quickly finds herself pressed up against the ward for support. The edges of her vision darken. She wants to go home.

“Please let me go,” she begs, mind fogging as a tear slides down her cheek.

“Make your choice,” Kingsley tells her unfeelingly. “I will not tell you again.”

Whimpering, she shuts her eyes.

She needed to be somewhere else, somewhere warm and dim. She needed to get clean, to stop the itching. All of her materials were at home, she still needed to build her nest. Without the normal warning there was so much to do. She needed to start hydrating else she suffered migraines later in the process. Before long her body would begin rejecting solids—the least enjoyable part of heat preparation. Then the cramps would come. And... and then she would need an alpha.

But not like this.

Not when she was served like a meal on a platter to something starving. Not when there were so many to choose from. She needed less. Less eyes, less options.

The list.

The list Harry and Theo made for her. The list would be simpler.

It started with, it started...

Charlie. Charlie Weasley. But he wouldn't be here. He was abroad. Romania. Not here.

Tucking her face into her hands, she thinks hard for the next names.

Neville was in Scotland at Hogwarts. Then there was Blaise Zabini, and she had no clue where he was. It had been years since she'd even thought of him. But he was Italian, and rich, odds are he wasn't in the risers.

Next was Draco.

Draco was safe. He helped her. She liked him. He would be good to her. She'd wanted to stay with him...

Lifting her face out of her hands she braves the alphas, forcing herself to search for him. The longer she looks and the more faces she scans, the sicker to her stomach she becomes.

After checking only a fraction of the courtroom her will falters and she is forced to avert her eyes once more, letting out a pitiful whine as she sinks to the floor.

It was useless. He wasn't there. They'd told him to stay in his office, it was unlikely he even knew they were doing this to her. If he knew—

"This is cruel!" Someone shouts.

"This omega has broken the law! Allowing her to choose from anyone present today is more than generous." The minister rebuts.

"She is in distress and on the precipice of heat."

"Mister Nott—"

"She can't possibly make a decision faced by so many alphas. At best she'll be forced to subspace to spare herself from this spectacle. And all that will do is waste time she doesn't have."

"What would you have me do?"

"Let us thin out her options." It's Harry speaking then. "We know her, we want what's best for her. Let us help, we'll follow your rules."

"What do you propose?"

There are grumbles around the courtroom, an understanding that they are about to be weeded if her friends have anything to say about it. But the intervention brings her much needed relief, her omega soothed by their familiar voices.

"If you are under the age of thirty raise your arm." Theodore calls, taking control.

Hermione opens her eyes to see half the room with their arms raised, some blatantly fibbing, their hair already greying. She looks to the podium, to a contemplative minister, and then her best friends. Harry holds her gaze, apologetic and angry.

Kingsley takes note of the alphas around the room as she did, "If you are found falsifying your answers, there will be dire consequences."

Arms lower.

Pushing their luck, Theo and Harry continue to weed the alphas down for her.

"If you're a witch, lower your arm."

"If you've been married or are currently in a relationship, lower your arm."

"If you have children, lower your arm."

About a quarter of those gathered remain with their arms raised.

“If you’re—“

“Enough,” Kingsley demands. “Those with arms raised, stand and come to the dais to greet the omega. The rest of you remain in the risers.”

There is a mass migration of eligible alphas, and she presses off the ward to keep those approaching from behind at a distance, getting shakily to her feet. Her insides fray apart, pushing her closer and closer to subspace. It’s terrifying to watch them come down from the risers towards her until the most eager contacts the ward, confirming for her they cannot get through.

“If you do not select someone from this group, I will select for you, Omega.” Kingsley declares loudly as she swivels her head, trying to keep track of each wizard as they file around her, three deep against the ward.

Although considerably less to sort through, the task is no less daunting and several times more overwhelming due to their sudden proximity to her.

Hermione anxiously rubs the glands in her wrists against the fabric of her blouse for comfort, trying to sooth herself as she picks a place to start.

A smiling wizard grabs her attention and he presses a hand against the ward in invitation.

Hesitantly, she takes a step toward him, knowing she needs to give some of them the chance if she’s to have any control in this awful situation. Her omega squirms despite her bravery.

“Good,” he coos at her, his smile suddenly looking anything but welcoming.

She shivers and turns her attention away from him, giving herself a moment by staring at her shoes.

Some of the other alphas get the idea into their head that they can coax her to them. Some knock on the ward producing a terrible hollow thump.

“Hello there.”

“Come here, omega.”

Thump, thump.

“Omega.”

“No,” she gasps, hating to be addressed as such.

Her nerves are suddenly everywhere, the threat of subspace pulsating in her temples like waves on sand. She buries her face in her hands, knees knocking together before buckling. Curling over herself, the heels of her palms pressing into her ears in a futile effort to keep the voices out, she begs for it all to stop, “Please.”

“It’s okay omega.” Another alpha tries.

“Omega?”

“Hello.”

“Kingsley, stop this!” Harry shouts over the cacophony of cooing and cawing.

“Omega.”

“Don’t be afraid.”

Thump.

“Mione!”

“Hey, come here.”

“I’ll take good care of you, omega.”

“Stop it!” she begs them, darkness drifting in as her body begins to give over to the falling sensation.

“Omega.”

“Pick me.”

Thump, thump, thump!

“You’ll be safe in our home.”

“I’ll give you strong children—”

“Omega!”

"Granger."

Hermione’s head flies up, darkness scattering, and she searches the alphas surrounding her for—Draco.

The rest of the noise in the courtroom fizzles out as she focuses on the grey eyes of the alpha. A sense of relief washes over her as she holds his worried gaze. *He’s there.*

“*Look at me, omega.*”

Going rigid, her eyes dash to the alpha responsible for the command. A blur of faces, shapes, and colors makes it difficult to sort out who it was who called to her. Panicking when she can’t decide the identity of the alpha, darkness presses down on her again. Her forehead meets the cool stone ground and her limbs continue to furl tighter to her body.

“*Breathe, love.*” She hears, and she does.

It helps to hold off imminent subspace a few moments longer, but her ability to endure any more of this disappears as seconds tick by. If she had any say, it had to be now.

“Granger, breathe.”

With the last shreds of lucidity, Hermione makes her choice, speaking to the courtroom.

The voices assaulting her from every direction die suddenly and Kingsley speaks up, “What did you say *omega*?”

“Draco.” She says again, “I pick Draco Malfoy.”

As outrage erupts around the courtroom, she leans into instinct, succumbing to the dark.

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Heart pounding, he watches Granger lose the battle against her omega magic and slump over on the marble floors. But her words were clear enough for anyone to discern, and he looks up at the pedestal expectantly as the tension between all the other alphas breaks and chaos ensues.

Shacklebolt holds his gaze for several breaths. Draco had anticipated anger, though he’s met only with shock.

It takes the minister being physically shaken by a nearby auror for him to react to the mob of alphas attacking the ward around the omega witch and those crowded around the base of the pedestal. Even alphas remaining in the risers have taken to their feet.

Holding his wand to his throat, the minister suddenly booms, “Enough! Everyone go back to the risers immediately!”

It does little to quell the outburst.

Next, aurors are sent into the fray, taking down the most violent of the alphas and corralling the rest back. Draco resolves not to move. He wouldn’t leave Granger’s side, not now.

As the other alphas are forced back to their seats the minister descends to the floor of the courtroom, approaching him in a huff. Shacklebolt has questions, starting with: “Did you exert your influence over her?”

“No, Minister.” He shakes his head.

“Have you ever? You work in the Archives department as well.”

“I have not.”

“She was found in your office earlier.” The wizard is suspicious of him and of Granger’s pick of him.

“We’re—friends. She came to me for protection,” he extends the truth a bit.

“It’s hard for me to imagine a friendship between the two of you, given your history.”

Draco is spared providing an answer.

“The wards are in place, Minister.” An Unspeakable approaches. Draco looks to the risers, noticing they’re now blocked off by the pearlescent shimmer of a ward, the unchosen alphas trapped behind it still protesting.

The vein in Shackbolt’s temple looks ready to burst as he looks between Draco and the collapsed witch on the dais. He frowns, muttering to himself. “Should have never ... publicly.”

Draco’s pulse jumps, concerned the minister might retract the terms given to Granger because it was *him* she chose.

“Take this ward down,” the minister commands the lingering Unspeakable, motioning to the ward Granger is enclosed within. Locking eyes with Draco, the minister snuffs and looks away. “The lift and my private floo will be made available to you to take the omega somewhere for mating. My aide will show you the way.”

Draco barely hears the end of the minister’s sentence as the wards around Granger fall.

Rushing forward, he drops to his knees beside her. With gentle hands, he pushes her loose curls back from her face, murmuring softly, “Granger? It’s Draco. Come on, love, come back. I’m going to get you safe, but I need you with me. I need to be able to talk to you.”

The witch lets out a soft whine, her eyes glassy and vacant as they open, her fingers curling into a fist against the marble.

“I know,” he says, petting back her curls. “I know it’s too much. Take your time, you’re doing so well.”

Summoning his discarded robes from where she’d been forced to leave them, he drapes them over her, hoping it might help.

Potter is suddenly beside him, then Nott.

“Hermione, love,” Potter calls to the witch, his voice wavering.

“Malfoy, I suggest we find our way out of here.” Nott tells him as he glances around, positioning himself to watch their backs.

He nods in agreement, concocting a plan to get her out of here and a safe place to bring her. It wouldn’t surprise him if, once aware, she wanted to go home. Trouble was, he wasn’t well informed of the location and he knew better than to ask for it while in a room of hundreds of alphas.

“*Hermione, come back up,*” Potter commands in a whisper, his hand rubbing Granger’s back slowly. She rouses slightly, but it isn’t enough.

“Misters Potter and Nott, you will not be permitted to leave with the omega.” Shacklebolt says from where he looms over them.

Instinct pushes Draco to rise up on his knees and better shield Granger from the minister as the other two alphas protest this new decision. Shacklebolt doesn’t budge.

Locking eyes with Potter, he decides, “I have to take her now. I promise she’ll be safe.”

Potter’s alpha magic rises at the suggestion but he does well to temper it, “There’s things you need to know.”

“I know. We’ll find a safe *place*.” He hopes his double meaning is conveyed well enough.

Green eyes widen a bit.

Before Shacklebolt can make any other decisions, Draco carefully collects Granger in his arms, cocooning her inside of his robes, and wishes she was cognizant of what was happening and able to weigh in. It felt wrong to treat her like an object to be toted around. And it was somewhat reminiscent of the first time he’d stolen her away from danger.

He’d been so young, panicked and confused. Desperate to stop his aunt...

Pushing through emotions lingering from the war, he takes a breath and focuses on the physical. Granger’s face rests just below the crook of his neck and he can feel her warm breath against his pulse each time she exhales. It strikes him just how slight she is in comparison to him, barely there in his arms.

His arms. His to protect.

Standing, he curls her close and gives Potter one last look, confirming their silent agreement.

“Mister Malfoy, my aide John will take you to my office.” Shacklebolt motions to a young wizard in poorly fitting robes waiting at the doors of the courtroom.

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“Come on, love,” someone murmurs into her ear, soft and low.

The darkness surrounding her waivers, she feels herself rising.

“I’m getting you safe, you’re okay.”

Focusing hard on the voice, her desperation and other turmoil return like a weight in her chest indicating she’s borderline conscious.

“Come back.”

A chime is what startles her from the darkness in the end, her eyes open to see Draco close to her. She tenses for a moment, and he glances down seeming relieved.

“Hey there, Granger, it’s okay.”

“Draco?” He steps out of the lift they were riding in, another wizard leading the way.

“We’re still in the ministry. Shacklebolt is letting us use his floo to get you out of here.”

“To where?”

“Home, I’m taking you home.”

Taking a deep breath she relaxes into him, “Thank you.”

She doesn’t say anything more as they come upon the minister’s offices, the undersecretaries and secretary sitting at the four desks outside the grand doors.

“John?” one prompts.

“The minister has given his permission for the use of his floo.”

“Of course.” The witch locates a key ring, shuffling through them as she stands and clickclops over to the office.

Groaning slightly as the next stage of preheat taunts her, Hermione turns her face into Draco, taking slow, deep breaths. Things are progressing too fast. Not much time could have passed between the courtroom and now, and yet her body was acting as if she was in the second day of her preheat.

“What’s wrong?” he asks quietly, concern lacing his tone as he follows the witch and wizard into the minister’s office.

Shaking her head, Hermione does her best to stave off the nausea, “I should walk.”

Draco pauses a moment at the doorway to let her down, but she ends up needing his assistance to keep upright, a hand clasped firmly on his bicep as she sways. “Granger?”

“I’ll be alright.”

“Be sure not to disturb anything, the floo powder is on the mantle in the crystal jar.” The secretary instructs as they approach at Hermione’s pace.

A particularly violent swirl of the room has her leaning heavily on the wizard and she whimpers in upset.

“Are you alright Miss—Circe, you’re Hermione Granger.” The secretary gasps.

“Granger, please let me help you?” Draco pleads as she fails to regain stable footing.

“Okay,” she manages.

Wrapping an arm around her, he carries her to the floo, grabbing a fistful of floo powder along the way before ducking inside with her. Secured flush to his chest by his arm, he

throws the acid green powder at their feet and calls out a destination.

... ..

At the witch's reaction to their first way stop, Draco feels guilt creep in. He knows he should have okayed it with Granger before bringing her there but it was the only private floo he could think of that was accessible to the both of them.

"No, no!" She tugs away from him, retreating back inside the sooty chimney.

"We aren't staying, we aren't going anywhere near the drawing room." He assures her, holding out his hand to her, "We just need to get outside—it isn't far. I won't let anything happen to you. I promise."

Looking near-tears, Granger takes his hand and crowds him, her entire body trembling. "Quickly, please."

Ensuring he doesn't go too fast, Draco leads the way through his family manor in Wiltshire.

Glancing at the witch, he notices her eyes are squeezed shut and she blindly follows him. It makes his remorse almost bitter.

He caused this distress, this discomfort.

And yet she trusts him to keep her safe.

The front entrance is in sight when a voice calls to them. "Draco, my love? What are you doing here—"

He doesn't stop to speak with his mother, or to flaunt his witch, only lending his attention for a split moment as he corrals Granger outside. When her relief is visible and immediate, the guilt stabs through him once again.

Draco leads her by the hand down the grand staircase toward the fountain, the marble peacock eyeballing them as they pass.

"I'm not feeling very well," she confesses and tightens her hand in his. "I'm progressing too quickly."

"Right. Where is the nearest apparition point to Grimmauld Place? That's where Potter lives, yeah? Can you get to yours if we go there?" he asks as he guides the struggling witch toward the gates. As her knees buckle slightly, he stops to catch her. "Granger?"

A low whine escapes her as she fails to stand on her own again. Something is clearly happening to her, and it worries him.

"I've got you," he tells her, scooping her into his arms, hurrying toward the gate. "Granger, where do we go?"

"Grimmauld. The front step." She bites out, pressing a hand over her eyes. "I might be ill."

“That’s okay,” he tells her as the gates swing open to him on approach. He steps past the wards to where he can apparate, holding the witch tight. “Ready?”

She nods.

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Landing on the front step of Grimmauld Place, Hermione feels her stomach protest. “Down.”

Draco sets her down just in time as she leans over the wrought iron rail and empties her stomach into the bushes. A warm hand slides between her shoulder blades, the other collecting her curls.

When she is certain she is safe to stand, she wipes her mouth with the back of her arm, straightening.

“Let’s get you inside,” Draco says, helping her to the door and knocking. No one answers meaning Harry and Theo hadn’t been released yet. A shot of panic courses through her, and she tries to keep back the tears that want to follow.

“The key,” she forces herself to say, propping herself up against the building. “There’s an enchanted statue in the garden that carries it—a dog.”

They both look for it. Draco actively and she passively from the stoop. A few minutes later, the wizard returns successfully with the old brass key and lets them inside.

Hermione stumbles through the front entrance on clumsy feet, eyes pressed tightly shut against her building headache. Her company makes sure she doesn’t teeter over as thoughts preoccupy her.

She needed to start drinking water, needed to clean, to sort, to make everything right. Everything had to be perfect for this heat, for her alpha.

It strikes her: she has an alpha. She chose an alpha. And they are together, alone, and her body is preparing for a heat that could kill her or find her mated on the other side of it.

“Granger, where—“

“I need Harry,” she finds herself saying, suddenly fearful of being alone with him. She isn’t comfortable taking him back to her flat just yet. Hardly anyone had ever been allowed there. It was her space, it was safe, and she didn’t want to risk tainting it. She wasn’t yet desperate enough.

“He knows we’re here. As soon as they’re able, they’ll come.” Draco tells her, pulling her gently away from the wall where she’s slumped. “Where is the parlor? You need to sit.”

“To the left after the stairs.”

With his arm wrapped around her waist, and her hand clasped in his much larger one, Hermione is led to the sofa in the parlor.

Sinking into the cushions, she holds Draco's worried gaze. It's alluring and intense. Her magic responds, some of the stress in her body subsiding.

"Thank you." She looks away.

He hovers. "How can I help? You don't look well."

"Water—it will make me feel better." Hermione presses on her temple, massaging the ache in her skull.

Draco nods. "Kitchen?"

"The last door in the hall, then a right."

"Okay. I'll be right back."

Curling her legs under herself, Hermione adjusts the pillows around her, fluffing, primping, and shuffling them about until she hears Draco returning.

Water in hand, the wizard comes to kneel before her, offering the glass. She accepts it and quickly drinks, hoping to combat her discomfort.

"Granger..." the wizard crouched before her murmurs, hands braced on the sofa to either side of her knees.

Without meaning to, she tenses, anticipating the worst—that seemed to be the way her luck was running.

Draco clears his throat, refusing to meet her eye. "It doesn't need to be me."

"What?"

He clears his throat once more. "I can get someone else for you. Anyone you want to help you."

Blood rushes through her ears, her head spins, and her stomach churns. He's rejecting her. "You don't want to..."

"I want you to have a choice. Even if that choice isn't me. There is still time. I can get the alpha who helps you—"

Shaking her head, she tries to understand. Had she been wrong in thinking this was anything more than biological attraction? Did he really not care for her beyond her designation? It didn't add up. Nothing he was saying made any sense.

"What are you saying?"

He looks at her then, seeming pained, "The alpha who normally sees you through your heats. If you want him, I will—"

“There is no alpha,” she tells him, fingers anxiously shifting on her water glass. The wizard looks puzzled, so she clarifies as plainly as possible, trying to understand what he was trying to get at. “Draco... I’ve never been helped.”

“You’ve never...”

“I’ve never spent my heat with an alpha,” she tells him again, squirming.

His body locks up, not even his breathing disturbing his sudden stillness. In fact, she isn’t completely sure he hasn’t stopped breathing.

“Draco...?” Hermione whispers.

He blinks, and his eyes are suddenly burning through her, “No one has ever taken care of you?”

“No.” The word is more air than spoken word. Horror twists the handsome wizard’s features up. Hermione wants to reach for him and smooth away the worry she sees with her touch. She resists.

“Granger,” Draco starts hoarsely, “Tell me you haven’t endured alone all this time.”

“I...”

“Who makes sure you’re fed and drinking and resting? Who ensures your needs are met? That you’re satisfied?”

Opening her mouth to tell him *she does*, her voice fails. Even without saying it, it feels like a lie. She doesn’t want to lie to him. Not now. Not ever.

He realizes several things on his own. “That’s why you never smell of an alpha afterwards. Why you are always ill—Merlin and Circe. How many times?”

“What?”

His hands become fists. “How many times have you suffered?”

“Draco—”

“Granger, tell me,” he pleads with her, so sincere and insistent. “This is important.”

“I... this will be my twenty-seventh heat.” Hermione doesn’t expect the shame she feels voicing that.

The air rushes from the wizard’s lungs, and he squeezes his eyes shut, trembling slightly.

“Draco?”

“Please,” he whispers, breathing deeply through his nose before looking at her again. “Please let me help you this time, Granger. Please don’t do this alone.”

Heart thumping, she can't help herself and reaches out, brushing a finger along his brow, "I already picked you."

"I know," he leans up, putting their eyes level as he searches her face. "But I'm asking you again, now. Without an audience. Without an ultimatum. Will you have me?"

Surprisingly, despite all of her feelings surrounding alphas and mating, it isn't hard to tell him, "Yes."

Catching her hand, he presses a kiss to her palm, stoking the budding fire in her belly. His touch seems to spur her progress, and suddenly she is feeling ill again.

There wasn't much time left before the sweats and aches would start if she was already experiencing these symptoms.

"Granger?" Draco asks as she pulls away, pressing her hand to her lips.

Before she can say anything, the floo flares green and Harry stumbles out, eyes wild. "Hermione!"

Harry is beside them in an instant as the floo flares once more and Theodore steps out, surveying the room before turning back to the fireplace and sliding the small lever above to close the magical entrance off from public grates.

Appraising her quickly, Harry holds the back of his hand to her forehead, "How long?"

"Tonight," she manages between waves of nausea, reaching out to blindly set her water glass on the side table.

It slips, but Draco rights it, looking between the other two alphas. "What's the plan?"

"Love, do you want Malfoy here?" Theodore asks tersely, obviously putting off pheromones if the dilation of Draco's eyes is anything to go by. His body presses closer to the sofa, to her.

"Yes," she nods and immediately regrets it, letting out a soft groan. "I need to go home."

Harry stands from his perch on the cushion beside hers, spurred to action. "Right, Malfoy, you're with me."

Chapter End Notes

This wasn't the full update I had planned. But I just don't have the time with courses to get the second half of the chapter written right now and don't want to keep you waiting longer after saying this update was coming. I hope it's a good bridge to the next one!

How are we feeeelingggggg?

Chapter 10: Chapter Ten

Chapter Summary

Over the edge

Chapter Notes

Thanks for being so patient with me! I'm officially graduated and moved to my new place. Updates should be more regular now. Fingers crossed.

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Thursday, April 22, 2004 cont...

Potter takes the stairs two at a time, trusting that he follows even though it's the witch they'd just left in the parlor he wishes to be with. Luckily he's still able to win over instinct and does as told—even as his compliance burns in his chest like acid.

They climb to the third floor of Grimmauld then veer off down a dark corridor to the last room on the right.

Entering after Potter, he looks around. The room is filled with various desks, cabinets, and chests, and beneath the windows is a brewing bench where several cauldrons bubble under charms. If not for the lack of dust and active potions, he'd think this room was storage due to the sheer amount of odds and ends contained within.

Shuffling a pile of stray parchments on a chair inside the door, he reads the scribbles, making out that they are notes on designations but not much else. Potter beelines for a chest of drawers in the back corner.

“What is all of this?”

“Research. Ways to help Hermione. Ways to keep her safe.” The other alpha explains, continuing to rummage through drawers as a travel case slides out from beneath the desk across the room, stopping beside the Gryffindor as he begins to pull vials and jars out, setting them inside. “After Theo and I mated, she moved into her own place. It's in muggle London, so no alphas around. The only way in is our floo downstairs. Her front door was sealed off and warded for safety—here, take this,” he stands, passing the travel case to Draco to hold open as he goes to another cabinet.

Cradling the case in his arms, Draco follows the other wizard.

“She felt she was invading upon us. So we had to sort out a way she could be on her own. Independent and secure. We researched wards, concealment charms, anything we could without drawing attention. We have contacts abroad that were good help, but they were never let in on the real reason behind our inquiries.”

“How’d you explain that?” Potter passes him several things, searching the back of the shelf for what he needs.

“A desire for privacy. I’m a war hero mated to an ex-Death Eater. It wasn’t questioned when I looked into additional security. But we also had to sort out how to hook up the floo without going through the ministry. It was an interesting bit of magic.” Potter straightens up then, locking him in his intense green stare. “No one can know where Hermione actually lives, Malfoy. All our friends and family think she still stays here with us. It’s safer that way. And before we go over you’ll swear on your magic.”

“Of course.” He wasn’t going to argue or try to convince the wizard that he would never betray Granger or her safety.

Letting out a breath, the Gryffindor nods and looks around. “There’s more I need to tell you, but I have to go to Diagon Alley first. We’re out of some of the potions she’ll need for the heat. Since it’s early and our brews aren’t ready—pain potions and the like.”

“Pain potions?” Draco’s heart clenches at the thought.

“We have no idea how this heat will be for her. But normally it isn’t pleasant. The potions don’t last, but they take the edge off. Especially in the first hours before she goes into subspace.”

His heart contracts again, a sharp pain in his chest. “Why does she...”

Potter frowns, averting his gaze. “I know you have questions, and I’ll try to answer them in the time we have. But my errands are more important.”

“Right,” he agrees.

“Thank you, Malfoy.” He locks their gazes again. “For being there. For doing this. She’ll figure it out, too, eventually.”

“What?”

“That you love her. That you’re good for her.”

Potter’s words are undeniably sincere, and it makes him ache. It was everything he wanted. And in hearing that sentiment from one of the people she trusted most and seeing the effort the other wizard dedicates to the witch, he discovers a new appreciation for the man.

Like Draco, Harry Potter would do anything for Hermione Granger.

“Bring that to the parlor, would you?” Potter motions to the travel case. “And if you need anything from your home, go now. Clothes, hygiene products, blankets, anything. But be quick and make certain you aren’t followed.”

... ..

Hermione sways as they step out of the floo into her flat, her stomach lurching violently. She doesn’t make it two steps before she’s keeled over, vomiting the little food left in her stomach, acid burning her nose.

Theo hovers over her helplessly, one hand wrapped around her bicep to keep her on her feet, the other bunching her hair back for her.

Coughing out the extra saliva blocking her breathing, Hermione cries, body beginning to tremble. It was much too soon for vomiting and, soon she was sure, the trots. And yet...

Dally pops into the foyer and banishes her mess with a snap, “Missy!”

“Dally, she’s starting her heat,” Theo tells the elf as he helps her down the hall and into her en-suite loo through the bedroom. As soon as she’s knelt in front of the toilet bowl, she’s vomiting again, this time just acid.

“Oh missy.” Dally secures her hair back before popping out of the bathroom.

“I know you thought tonight, but love—“

“I know,” she groans, propping her face up as she waits for the next bout. Her forehead is clammy, and her stomach is starting to grumble. Emptying her body of solids in a hurry was one of the worst parts of heat, and usually the night of day two of her pre. But it had been less than four hours since her pheromones broke through her suppressants at the ministry and the symptoms began. At this rate, she had only an hour or two left before she was properly in heat.

“Oh gods,” she groans, leaning back over the toilet bowl as she vomits more acid, her eyes blurry with tears.

Dally pops back into the loo with a pitcher and water glass, setting them on the counter before coming to her with a wet flannel, draping it across the back of her neck. “Dally takes cares of missy.”

Hermione relaxes knowing her elf will know exactly how to help her, just as she always does, and sags when her little hands begin to comb through her hair in comfort.

“Outs now,” she tells Theodore, shooing him.

“I’ll be just outside, love.” Theo steps out, shutting the door behind himself.

Letting out a pitiful sob, Hermione rests her forehead in her hands, eyes squeezed shut as she openly cries. “Dally—“

“Dallys is here missy. Yous is okay.” The elf coos, snapping to shut out the main lights in the room, leaving only the nightlight illuminated. It makes her feel less exposed.

“I’m scared.”

“Dallys is here. Dally won’t let’s anythings happen to missy.”

... ..

Dumping the contents of the first traveling trunk he'd seen out in the sitting room, Draco drags it to his bedroom and tosses open the door.

Hurrying like he was told, he ducks into the closet and pulls out a few outfits and his softest jumpers, throwing them in the bottom of the chest. Next, he goes to his en-suite and quickly packs his toiletries into an additional small chest, tossing it carelessly. It lands with a loud thunk, but he’s already moved to the bed, stripping off his blankets and stuffing them into the trunk.

Potter had mentioned blankets when he was sent on this errand, and it made his pulse jump at the thought of Granger in his bed, bathed in his scent. Although they were spending her heat at her flat—the safest place and most comfortable location for the witch—he hoped she wouldn’t be averse to the idea of using his things.

His alpha magic was pressing forward, driving his decision-making now, and he couldn’t help but feel as if what he had collected for his witch was insufficient. He had been given so little time to prepare.

What would she eat? What would she drink? What would she wear? Was the space prepared? Was it secure? Would they be safe?

A large part of him wanted to take ownership of these responsibilities, but the remaining rational part of himself knew Potter and Nott would be handling it—at least for this heat.

The next one, if Granger would have him, he was determined to prepare for on his own.

For now, he needed to get back to her.

... ..

Hermione spent the better part of an hour locked in the loo before her body settled, Dally remaining steadfast by her side as she sobbed on the floor between bouts of sickness.

Following the accelerated ordeal, an experience Hermione couldn’t decide was better or worse than normal, her elf does her the kindness of bringing her a soft nightie following a quick wash, and retrieves her softest jumper—coincidentally an old one of Theodore’s.

Now, she eyes the alpha somewhat warily as she sits still for Dally, who plaits her damp hair back from her swelling mating glands to either side of her throat. Theodore watches her, but remains seated across the flat on the long couch near her bookshelves, giving her much-needed space.

“Where did they go?” she asks as Dally busies herself by bringing her another pitcher of water—her third.

“Haz and Malfoy?” Theodore asks quietly as if her question could be about anyone else. She nods. “Running a few errands. They should be arriving in the next little while.”

She looks to the clock on the wall of the kitchen, her skin prickling. “I don’t have very long. Another hour? Maybe two...”

“They’ll be here.”

Dally presses a full glass into her twisting fingers. Hermione obeys the implied command and sips at the tepid water, forcing herself to continue to drink despite the slight discomfort she would continue to feel until she began to produce slick. Another necessary step in the preheat process.

Taking a long breath in through her nose, she quietly asks her company, “What happens if he mates me?”

The wizard doesn’t answer and she looks at him, noticing the sadness in his gaze.

Her heart pangs behind her ribs, “You won’t let him take me away...”

“Never,” Theodore agrees, brown eyes hardening in resolve. “Out of the question.”

Nodding, Hermione stares back into her water glass. “What happens if he doesn’t mate me?”

He thinks for a moment, “Then you’re back to where you were, I suppose. Back to making a decision.”

Tears build in her eyes again. “I’m not ready for this.”

“Hermione, love, I don’t think you ever will be... but that doesn’t mean you won’t survive it.”

Worrying her lip nervously, a tear slips down her cheek. “He was a good choice, wasn’t he?”

“Yes, love.”

“He won’t hurt me. He hasn’t ever hurt me. He takes care of me.” The words are as much for herself as they are for Theodore.

“You did so well, Hermione,” Theo praises from across the room. “These circumstances were never something we anticipated. But you got through it. And you’ll get through your heat.”

She is comforted by what he says enough to sit and finish her glass of water, setting it aside. But it isn’t long before more unsettling thoughts jump to mind.

“Theodore... What about Kingsley? What about the legal repercussions of our secrecy? He threatened to throw you both in Azkaban. What happens after this heat? He won’t let it go, he

can't—"

"Don't think about that right now." Theodore moves as if to stand, and she is quickly to her feet, prepared to retreat. She didn't want anyone near her right now. Everything was becoming more intense inside her head. She had little time before she'd be incapable of thinking or acting rationally. He sits back, noticing her discomfort.

Confident he will remain on the sofa, Hermione slides back onto the stool at the kitchen counter, "I can't help but worry about it. If I come out of this heat alive—"

"When."

"If I survive and remain unmated, the Ministry will come after me—us—again." Emotion climbs up her throat and her eyes burn, more tears slipping out. "I won't let anything happen to you or Harry. I couldn't—"

"Hermione, hush," he rumbles soothingly. "You don't need to worry about these things right now. There will be time later. And while you get through this heat, Haz and I will come up with a solution, yeah?"

"I'm afraid." She confesses. Not needing to.

"I know, love." He shifts where he sits again. It's obvious he wants to go to her, to comfort her. He restrains himself. "Haz and I will stay as long as we can, just like usual. And we'll be back as soon as it's over. We will get you through this."

Her chin trembles.

"Theo, I don't know how to be with an alpha. What if waiting so long... broke me? What if I'm not good enough?" Hermione curls herself up onto the wooden stool, tucking her chin against her knees.

"You're perfect, Hermione. I know it, Haz knows it, and Malfoy knows it. Or if he doesn't, he will soon."

"You have to say that," she sighs, insecure with herself.

"Love, you're everything a wizard could ever want. Not because you're an omega, because you're you. You're brilliant, charismatic, and kind. I'm so fortunate to have been welcomed into your life, to have your trust, and to call you family. Malfoy sees that. He's interested in *you*, not the omega."

"You're sure?" she snuffles.

"Positive."

Offering a small smile of appreciation to the wizard, she lets his words seep in and settle her worries. She didn't have the energy to continue to fret over every little thing that might happen in a few short hours or over the wizard who she'd asked to see her through her

approaching heat. What was to come would be hard enough as it was. And once it started, the rest was out of her control.

“Missy needs to drinks,” Dally reminds her from the kitchen, working to prepare things she could stomach during her heat.

Taking up the water pitcher to refill her glass, she does as told.

... ..

The front door opens and shuts. Draco feels the weight of the wards sealing as Potter marches into the parlor. “Good, you’re here.”

“Found everything?” He stands to greet the Gryffindor.

“Enough,” Potter nods, setting down a large paper sack on the coffee table beside the travel case and Draco’s trunk. “Whatever you bring, be prepared that Hermione might form an attachment. You might not get it back.”

“She can have all of it,” he nods, glancing at the floo. He was anxious to be reunited.

Potter can tell.

“Before we go, we need to go over a few things.” Potter sinks down into an armchair, motioning for Draco to do the same. Gritting his teeth against instinct, he sits. “As I was telling you before. Theo and I made sure Hermione’s flat was secure, but also that it fit her needs. There is a second bedroom only accessible through hers. It’s used exclusively for her heats. Everything she needs, everything she uses, is in there. She’s very private about the space—really doesn’t like people in there. That’s where she’ll have built her nest, and even though she’s chosen you, you should wait for her to invite you there.”

“Okay,” he tries to avoid the word being a growl.

Granger *nests*.

And the fact that Potter was telling him meant she nested even when she didn’t expect an alpha.

Bloody hell—his blood heated just thinking about it.

Although Draco wasn’t very well versed with the specifics of the omega designation—as he’d only ever had eyes for one omega and his desire to mate did not extend past her—he did know that it was a coin flip whether an omega nested or not.

Some nested on a whim. Some to entice alphas, as it brought out their possessive and caring instincts. Some would if they had a particularly hard cycle leading into heat and needed the additional comfort. Some nested only when ready for procreation. And some never nested.

But it seemed Granger fell into the uncommon category of always nesting. *That’s what his bedding was for.*

“—nic room. *Malfoy*? ” Potter grabs his attention back.

“Sorry?”

“This is important.” The other alpha frowns, green eyes stern.

“I know,” Draco shuffles, trying to focus. His semi was making it difficult. Merlin, he shouldn’t be so aroused.

Potter sits forward, “I mean it, you need to know these things so you don’t hurt her.”

That sobers him like a bucket of ice water. “I’m listening.”

Considering him a minute, the Gryffindor continues, “As I was saying, she also has a panic space. If anything goes wrong during heat, if she feels unsafe, she will go in there, and she will not come back out. Do not try to stop her. If that happens, you need to call for Dally.”

“Dally?” He thinks he’s heard a mention of the name before, but can’t remember in what context. In any case, there shouldn’t be another person there for Granger’s heat. It wasn’t safe.

“Hermione’s elf.” Potter clarifies. Ah. “She was a condition of Hermione going to live on her own—having company and someone to take care of her. Dally’s been especially good with her heat care.”

“Obviously not.” He doesn’t mean to sound so sour. But the state the witch had been in following heats over the past year wasn’t ‘cared for’. And the fact Granger had spent twenty-six heats on her own curdled his stomach.

“If you knew the difference she makes, you wouldn’t be saying that.” Potter sighs. “She’s no alpha, but she makes sure Hermione is fed and hydrated. That she gets her potions. It’s more than Theo or I can do for her without violating her trust and boundaries.”

Draco swallows, “What else?”

“She is sensitive to scents in heat, especially citrus and florals, so no fruits of that kind. She has floral hair products in the bathroom. Do not use them. Dally is preparing all the foods she’ll tolerate, but you should learn. She was much less picky with her food when her heats first started. Her tastes have become more difficult to cater to with time.”

It’s hard to hear. But good to know.

“When her heat is over, she gets cold. Blankets are best to keep her warm. There are plenty of extras in the room. You can’t use magic on her during heat or for at least a full day following, sometimes two. It’s too stimulating, and it will hurt her. So any aftercare or cleaning must be performed the muggle way. She will also probably be unable to stand on her own, even if the heat goes well. She expends so much energy to get through it, she’ll need time to recover.”

“How long?”

“It depends on the heat.” Potter scratches the back of his head, looking pained. “Sometimes it’s days until she can move more than room to room.”

Draco winces, eyes squeezed shut against the image that comes to mind. “Tell me the rest.”

He continues. “Don’t bathe for at least a half day once she’s aware again. Your scent will comfort her. When you eventually bathe, she’ll need help. Her hair is especially difficult because her curls mat. It takes a while to do it the Muggle way, but it makes her more comfortable. You can ask Dally to do it, or if you’re gentle with her, Hermione’ll tell you how.

“She may be sensitive to sounds. Loud noises have scared her in the past. She feels very vulnerable coming out of magic. She may want to go to her panic room. If she does, let her. Do not begin to deconstruct the nest unless she has started to, and never with her out of the room. If something falls off the bed, leave it. The bedding shouldn’t soak through as it’s made of heat-specific materials. But anything she adds might. You can push it off the bed if she’s asleep.

“Anything in the room when her heat starts should stay in the room. When you come out, you should be completely naked. She won’t leave the room until her heat is over, but if you need to, try for when she’s asleep. Dally handles all of the cleaning once the heat is over and Hermione has moved to her bedroom. Usually, that happens within a few days of her regaining consciousness. There are clothes in the dresser that she can tolerate before and after heat. Don’t try to dress her in anything else until she asks for it.”

“How do you know all of this?” Draco asks hoarsely. Everything Potter was telling him spoke to a severely neglected omega who had adapted with time to survive her heats. Knowing that and learning the details of it were two different experiences he was finding. His anger for her and determination to treat her well grew with every addition Potter made.

“Research, Dally, the first heats I spent with her before my presentation, what Hermione remembers, and another omega who stayed with her once.”

Draco nods, considering everything. “Is that all?”

“No. I mentioned before, she goes into subspace during her heats. It’s to escape the pain. But she hates it. Hates receding into her subconscious like that. She might cry coming out of it, or struggle to get back on her own. Just be gentle with her, patient. Don’t shake her or try to force her out. Talking to her is best, but don’t command her to come back. If something really goes wrong, if it’s bad, call for us. I know you want to be able to care for her, but we know her. We know how to help. And we won’t try to take her away from you. We just want her to survive this.”

“I’ll get her through it. I promise.”

... ..

A simmer of heat had begun in her magical core not too long after she’d begun her laps around the flat, putting things in better places, adjusting them just-so until it felt perfect.

Theodore remained a careful spectator to her puttering until a chime rang from down the hall, freezing her in place.

Her eyes shift to the slowly standing alpha in the corner. She takes a step in retreat. His hands go up.

“I’m just going to answer the floo, love, it’s Haz and Malfoy.”

“Draco?” She blinks, tucking her arms around herself. “But I’m not ready.”

“You have plenty of time, love. I’ll keep him out here, how about? And you finish getting ready.”

Nodding, she makes for her nest, leaving the doors she passes through open so she can still hear as she goes through her bedroom, then bathroom, finally into her heat room.

The warm, dark purples the room is decorated in are immediately soothing to her frazzled mind, and she putters over to the bed on her right, tugging the heavy drapes shut around the sides of the bed, leaving only a gap at the foot to crawl through.

It’s safest that way. Small. Enclosed. Warm. Dim. Soft.

Going to the armoire against the opposite wall, Hermione drags out her favorite blankets and pillows, holding them to her chest as she brings them to the bed one at a time, crawling inside and arranging them. Stuffing them here or there, readjusting as needed.

It had to be perfect.

::: ::: :::

Stepping through the floo after Potter, Draco emerges into a flat that smells wholly of Granger’s usual sterile scent, her perfumes, and hints of her true scent. He stops to breathe her in, having missed it the past few hours she’s been under the containment spells.

“Good, you’re here. She’s close.” Theodore meets them, looking stressed, and nods back over his shoulder. “Dally’s in a tizzy getting everything ready. She wants the potions.”

“Right.” Potter nods, setting off down the hall with the travel case and paper sack.

“This way, Malfoy,” Nott greets him, leading the way into the flat. The hallway opens into a small kitchen and a sitting room lined with bookshelves. “Dally put the usual charms on Hermione, so we can’t smell her. She’s in her rooms preparing.”

“Her nest?” Draco breathes, holding himself together—barely. It felt as if his magic was prepared to rip out of his skin in search of the witch. The nearest door is cracked open, and he can tell it is her bedroom as it’s where her usual scent is strongest.

“Yeah. She’ll come find you when she’s ready.”

“I have something for her.” He sets down the shrunken chest, resizing it and unlatching the top to reveal his bedding.

“Good thinking,” the other alpha nods. “Leave it there, she’ll find it. We need to go sit until she comes out. She doesn’t like it when we roam.”

Draco follows Nott to the sofa, sitting stiffly beside him as Potter and a little elf converse quietly in the kitchen—seems like she’s scolding him.

“Did Haz tell you about aftercare and her potions?”

“Not the potions.” He shakes his head, clamping his hands against his thighs to keep them from trembling. Now that he was here, the nerves were hitting him.

Would he be able to give Granger what she needed? Fulfill her expectations for an alpha? Her alpha? She’d not held out this long just to settle. He’d need to prove himself.

“She takes a pain potion every twelve hours. Pepper up as needed. Generally now and in three to four days, a little while into stage two. Are you familiar with the stages of heat?”

“Not like I should be…” he admits.

“Preheat is meant to last about three days. Obviously, this heat is a breakthrough, and her symptoms have been accelerated. But assuming the rest proceeds as normal, for the first six hours of full heat she will experience emotional swings, aching, cramps, and hot flashes. She’ll want to be held, and you’ll still be able to speak to her. By the end, she’ll be in subspace. Not all omegas go to subspace, but Hermione will. Once this happens, she’s in what is considered stage one. She will not sleep, she’ll need you constantly, and you’ll need to rut to keep up with her.”

Draco sucks in a breath. He’d never rutted with a partner before.

“That will generally last one to three days, and it’s incredibly important to make sure she’s drinking and replacing all the fluid she’s losing to slick production. Then stage two, lasting two to three days. She’ll sleep a handful of hours at a time between knots. You’ll be able to leave the bed for short periods to eat. She’ll eat if you feed her, but nothing hot or cold. Call for Dally, and she’ll make sure you have everything you need.”

“Right.” He gulps.

“Stage three consists of two to five days where she’ll sleep for six or more hours at a time, she’ll be oversensitive, in need of comfort and constant contact. She is most emotionally vulnerable in stage three and will be easing back into awareness. She can eat whatever she can stomach, but mainly needs to hydrate. And then once she’s fully regained awareness, she’ll have two to three days of post-heat bleeding—unless you’ve impregnated her.”

Draco chokes on his next breath, eyeing the other wizard. “Can we not use contraceptives? A baby should be her choice, and I hardly think this is the time to make a decision.”

“You will.” Potter comes over, holding out a jar to him. His racing pulse weakens in relief. “Normal contraceptives are useless for omega heats. Your magics—especially combined—negate any potion or spell. Instead, you’ll use this salve. It needs to be applied once a day to both of your navel areas. It has a smell, but it will go away once it dries. You’ll need to be careful not to get it on anything other than your skin. It won’t dry on fabric, and it could make the nest feel unsafe to her. And her healers warned us she might start to resist you when you put it on, so it’s best to do it while she sleeps.”

Turning the jar over in his hands, he inspects the paste inside. Everything was beginning to feel very real.

“Dally?”

Draco perks up, hearing Granger.

“Missy?” The elf rounds the kitchen counters, puttering toward the cracked-open bedroom door.

“Where are my robes?”

“Which robeses?”

“My robes, the robes I came in. Where have they gone? I need them.” The witch appears in her bedroom door—a thin, cream nightdress falling to her knees is the only thing covering her.

“Dallys washes them. Them dirty.”

“But I need—” Granger stops, body going rigid as her eyes flash up to meet him. “Draco.”

Nott puts a hand on his shoulder to keep him seated.

“Granger,” he utters quietly, eyes taking her in.

“Draco,” she murmurs again.

“Love?” Potter breaks her attention on him. “Did you see what Malfoy brought you?”

Her rich brown gaze falls to the open traveling trunk, and her eyes widen. Without wasting time, she collects his bedding into her arms, burying her face in it, and turns back around into the bedroom, disappearing with a quiet, “Thank you.”

The room is still for several heartbeats as they listen to soft footfalls and the elf returning to the kitchen.

“She doesn’t seem herself,” he murmurs, watching the doorway she retreated through.

“It’s her omega magic coming forward. But it’s still Hermione. She just conceals that part of herself well in public.” Theodore hums, leaning back into the cushions.

“Is there anything I should do?” he asks, fingers flexing against his thighs.

“Just sit and wait for her. She isn’t ready yet.” Potter tells him.

Draco nods, sucking in a long breath through his nose.

To keep himself busy—distracted—he looks around.

The bookshelves are filled with a mix of muggle and magical books, several of which are ancient and hard to come by. No doubt sourced meticulously by the witch or gifted to her from the ancient libraries of Nott, Potter, and Black.

But the wooden shelves do not only house books. Photographs stand framed among the titles.

A man and a woman, each with features belonging to Granger—her parents. They had been targets in the war, but the Death Eaters had never been able to find them. He was glad of that, but the age of the photos displayed is enough to indicate their absence in Granger’s adult life. He knows they’re gone, but doesn’t know why or how.

The Weasleys are displayed in another frame—this photograph is moving. It is an older photo as well, displaying the son who had been killed in the war. Draco wasn’t sure which twin it had been, if he was to be honest, but he felt guilty of his role in the death.

Several others are from their younger school days. Moments captured of a little bushy-haired girl reading in strange places. Of the golden trio on Hogwarts grounds during the changing seasons. The straggly orange kneazle that used to follow after the witch.

There’s one of Granger at about fifteen or sixteen—her expression ages her. He remembers that look from their sixth year. The exhaustion that seemed to be eating her from within... Theodore and Potter make up most of the rest of the frames. Some of the magical and muggle photographs feature Granger as an adult, closer to the witch he knows now. She looks content in each of them, healthier than her current and past selves. But her eyes are the same as that last year when they were in school together. Intense and foreboding.

It made his stomach curdle to remember her like that. It made him think of the last conscious look she gave him that day at the manor. Before her eyes became frenzied and unfocused and so disturbingly empty.

Potter leans around his bondmate, “Malfoy, I should—”

Sucking in a quick breath, Draco shakes himself from his thoughts, blinking away any lingering negativity. Now was not the time to get caught up in the past. Or to convince himself he didn’t deserve this, her.

He didn’t. But he would do anything to be the wizard—the alpha—to see her through this heat. Whatever lay in wait for them beyond the next several days did not matter. What *did* matter was for Granger to be safe and for her to survive this ordeal unharmed. *That* needed to be his focus.

“Would you like a glass of water? Or a calming draught? You’re looking a bit...unsettled,” the Gryffindor discerns, which means he’s doing a poor job of concealing his feelings presently.

“I—yes, actually. That would be good.” He nods, rubbing his sweating palms on his trousers.

“Dally,” Potter calls to the perpetually moving elf. “Would you please bring—”

The elf pops over, setting a tray on the low table before the three of them, containing a pitcher, three glasses, and a potion vial. “I’s is busy, sirs, please lets Dally be.”

“Wait, Dally,” Potter stops the elf before she can pop back into the kitchen. “Thank you for your hard work, but I need to introduce you to Draco Malfoy. He will be helping Hermione through this heat—”

“Dally helps missy through hers heats,” the little elf sets her hands on her hips, big eyes squinting at the three of them meanly.

“Hermione needs an alpha’s help this time, Dally,” Theodore attempts to explain to the overprotective creature. “She will still need and value your help. You always perform beautifully, and we appreciate all of your work.”

The elf’s disturbing glare fixes itself solely on Draco, and he flinches but meets the scrutiny head-on. “Yous an alpha?”

“Yes. And I’m eager to learn from you.”

“If yous hurts my missy, I hurts you,” she threatens, stomping a little foot before glaring between Potter and Nott once more. A pair of pops sounds her retreat back to the kitchen.

Draco quickly reaches for the calming draught and swallows it in one go.

... ..

Kneeling at the center of her nest Hermione adjusts a few more things here or there, tucking a pillow a bit further into the wooden boundary constructed to either side of the bed. It was built on to aid in her nest construction following her first heat in the bed. It upset her when the pillows and blankets and whatever other nonsense her heat-idled brain decided belonged in the nest tumbled to the floor from her wriggling and squirming.

A wash of heat in her belly halts her as she is smoothing a blanket and she presses a hand deep into her navel, a mild cramp pinching her insides beneath her fingers. She can feel the first trickle of slick dampening her knickers.

Fear overcomes her nesting instincts.

It properly hits her that she will either survive this heat with the help of Draco, likely mated on the other side of it, or it will do its best to kill her. *That* was the reality she faced.

Shuffling out of the nest to keep it from dampening as her body prepares itself, she lingers at the foot of the bed, rubbing the swollen glands in her wrists against her sides furiously. The slight burn of it provides some clarity as mating hormones set in more heavily.

It was not unknown to her that when an omega wanted something, a good alpha would provide it for them. Draco had been the epitome of a good alpha to her so far. She had nothing to fear from him. Draco was not going to hurt her, not intentionally at least. And rationally, she knew this. But emotionally, the thought of being intimate with the wizard was distressing.

She could feel her magic beginning to wane as the heat in her body crept from her magical core, snaking its way outwards into her extremities. Her skin would be burning with it soon, and after that, the cramps and slick would ramp up. She would be in pain and become desperate to be filled. With that thought another mild ache assaults her midsection and she squeezes her bare legs together, the glands embedded in her inner thighs contacting each other, sending a jolt through her core. A small gush of slick is her body's response, and it drips past the sodden material covering her cunt.

Her breathing was soft but labored now, and her legs were beginning to feel weak.

Hermione had no more time to spare, she was at the precipice and it was a matter of minutes before she fell over the edge into full heat.

Shyly creeping to her bedroom door, Hermione peaks out to look at the three alphas on her sofa. Harry is speaking in a quiet voice, explaining things to Draco, “—the potions we take. They’ll hopefully be here when you’re done so we can sort out what has happened and determine if it will happen again.”

Wilf and Rik were coming then. Hermione hoped it didn’t interfere with Wilf’s heat, she knew the other omega’s cycle end was coming sometime in the next weeks... she couldn’t think of that now.

Gripping the bedroom door jam for dear life, Hermione pushes the door slightly open to make herself known, woozy with the stirrings inside of her.

All eyes fall on her. She glances past the two alphas providing tender gazes and locks eyes on the steely grey of the newcomer.

Arousal blooms in her gut and her thighs clamp together, a gush of slick escaping her, dripping down her legs and making her thighs shiny with it. She doesn’t have the mind to be embarrassed over it just then.

“I...” she pants softly, rubbing her thighs together to create friction over the glands. Draco slowly stands, taking a step toward her, and Theo grabs his arm, halting him. Her grip on the door jam tightens. “I’m out of time.”

Draco rumbles, eyes darkening, “Are you ready for me?”

“I...” Shutting her eyes against a stronger cramp, her body reacts by folding itself slightly at the waist. “Please—”

“Alright, love, you’re okay,” someone reassures her, and she blinks open tearful eyes to watch them again.

“We’ll be at Grimmauld if you need us,” Harry says quietly, standing alongside Theodore.

Instinct drives her to retreat behind the door to keep them away as they move toward her.

“We love you, Hermione. It’s going to be okay,” Harry calls.

“Take care of her, Malfoy,” Theo says outside her bedroom door.

Footsteps sound their retreat down the hall to the floo. As soon as they’re gone, Hermione feels the wards locking, securing the flat for her heat.

“Granger?”

Hermione opens the bedroom door and moves slowly toward the loo, Draco Malfoy stalking her with his eyes, firmly stationed at the threshold to the room.

“May I come in?”

She nods, continuing backward, hoping he follows. He does.

Keeping him in sight, she leads him through the bedroom, through the loo, and back to her heat room where she has built her nest. She waits at the foot of the bed for him to close the distance.

When he’s nearly chest to chest with her, her neck bent back in an effort to look at him but not meet his eye, she whispers a timid, “Hi.”

“Hi, Granger,” he murmurs back, a hand raised cautiously to beside her ear. She leans her face into it, drawing comfort from the touch. “You doing okay?”

Sniffling, she shakes her head and leans more heavily against his palm, tears spilling out.

He frowns as if her pain hurts him as well, and moves to cradle her face gently in both hands. “You know I won’t hurt you.”

“I know you won’t try to,” she nods, taking a fortifying breath as she finally meets his intense silver gaze. “What did they tell you?”

“Enough to get you through this comfortably I hope.” His thumb swipes along her cheekbone, “Is there anything you want me to know?”

Thinking is difficult this close to the edge, but she manages to explain, “I’m not going to go into subspace right away. It takes a little while. And I don’t want to do anything before...”

“You want to be in subspace before I help you?” Draco’s eyebrows furrow.

“Yes.”

Hesitation turns him somewhat rigid as he responds, “How long does it take? How long will you be hurting before—”

“It’s normally a few hours,” she looks away but he pulls her chin back up, locking their eyes once more.

He protests vehemently, “Granger, please—”

“I’ve never been with someone before,” she confesses, cheeks growing more pink and not from heat.

“I understand that, but to let you suffer for hours—”

“No, Draco.” He doesn’t understand. “I’ve never had sex with anyone—in or out of heat.”

His eyes widen, fingers flexing against her jaw, “You... You’re a virgin?”

The answer was complicated, she didn’t quite know what to define herself as, “I’ve used heat toys but never... you know... with a partner. Whatever that makes me—”

His expression is a little bit dumbfounded but she can see the pleasure the knowledge brings him. She’d never noticed just how expressive his eyes were before this. “That’s—Granger, I can still—”

“Draco.” Hermione squeezes her eyes shut, beginning to feel heavy with her symptoms, “Please do this for me. I don’t want the negativity I am feeling to be part of the memory of my first time. I’m so afraid of this heat, I’m afraid to let you help me. If I panic while I can still make decisions I’ll hide and go through this alone and in my bones I know I will die if that happens. I need you to hold me and keep me calm until my omega magic takes over. I can handle a few hours.”

“Okay,” he agrees immediately, and she opens her eyes to find a determined look plastered on his face. “Okay, love.”

Relief she didn’t know she was waiting in anticipation of floods her and she can’t help but melt into his chest in thanks, burying her face against his ribs.

“How long until you’re fully in, do you think?” he asks after a minute, smoothing her plait down the back of her head, careful not to brush her glands.

“A handful of minutes,” she says, basking in his warmth and scent, “...we should call Dally.”

At the mention of her name, the elf pops into their presence, setting a tray on the small table in the far corner of the room—her potions.

Hermione pulls away from Draco gingerly, facing her doting elf instead. “Daddy, could you please lift the spell now?”

“Of course missy,” the elf snaps. Magic prickles across her skin as she’s released. Just like that, the elf pops away and Hermione hears the doors to her bedroom and bathroom shut simultaneously, sealing them into the internal rooms for the time being.

Draco suddenly inhales behind her and a low rumble confirms the containment spell is broken. His large hands whisper over her sides, his face dipping towards her neck.

“Draco,” she catches his hands, turning back to him as her heart thuds, alarmed.

“Granger?”

Looking up at him nervously, she recognizes the wizard is still in control and attempts to shake the fear she feels, “Can you promise me something?”

“Anything,” he agrees, solely focused on her.

“Try not to mate me?” she pleads, hands trembling.

He blinks away the flash of hurt she sees in him, breathing deeply, and nods.

A stronger cramp hits her then, and she juts an arm out to grab something for support, contacting the drapery around the bed before Draco provides his arm, holding her steady, “I can smell it on you now—how close you are. You need your potions.”

Crossing the room with her, Draco quickly unstoppers the potions for her and makes sure she finishes each—pain potion, pepper up, and calming draught. She is nearly panting now, vision beginning to blur.

“There’s one more,” the wizard tells her, emptying his pockets. She pays very little attention until he has a glass jar in hand. “Contraceptive.”

Throat feeling like sandpaper after the mix of potions, Hermione only nods.

“Potter said we should be nude for the application, it won’t dry on—”

Hermione doesn’t wait for him to finish, already pushing her slip from her shoulders at the suggestion. The silky material shimmies down her curves, revealing her body. Her breasts ache and her glands throb.

“Beautiful…” Draco murmurs, grey eyes burning paths over her exposed skin.

Her head is foggy, and she is feeling lost now. Everything is too bright, too open. “I’m—the nest…”

Before she can move to the bed, a warm hand snakes around the curve of her waist, grounding her, “Just a minute, Granger, let me put this on you.”

She hums in agreement, eyes rolling back as a firm hand rubs over her navel, massaging out the cramping she feels. “Please...”

“We’re going to the nest, just have to let this dry, love.” A gentle kiss presses against her shoulder, and she shivers. The hand tacky with the salve pulls away from her, but somehow she is still held in place as she sways, knickers uncomfortably wet. “Stand right there.”

Eyelids heavy, she does her best to stay in place, feeling a keen building in her chest. She wants to be touched again.

Rustling comes from behind her, and she hears the lid of the jar screwing back on.

“Draco?”

“I’m here,” he says in her ear, stepping close behind her, hands on her hips. “It’s nearly dry.”

“Why can’t we go to the nest? Did I do it wrong?” she whispers, not understanding why they aren’t on the bed.

“It’s perfect, love, you’re perfect,” he rumbles, the vibrations soothing her anxieties. His hands rub up and down her sides methodically until she’s putty in his hands. He breathes against her neck, “How about you show me what you made? Where do you want me?”

She hums, pleased by his praise, and guides him to the foot of the bed, parting the heavy purple drape to one side.

Sliding backward on her bum, she rakes her eyes over his bare—except for pants—body. Her fingers rub along a silvery scar across his collarbone as she reaches out to him. “Come in.”

Draco follows, crawling atop her as she slides up the bed to the wall of pillows and linens. The drapes shut behind them, blanketing them in comforting dimness, a warm haze from above the only way of seeing.

Once enclosed, Draco hovers above her. She lies back, body craving to be touched, cramps properly ailing her now—Hermione was officially in heat.

She can’t help but squirm beneath him, resisting touching herself with an audience—normally, her fingers were already buried in her cunt to help relieve the building ache between her legs.

“You’re uncomfortable,” Draco notices, easily settling to one side of her in the nest, his palm resting across the span of her stomach, providing gentle pressure. It feels good, and she arches into him.

“I—” She’s breathless, “it hurts.”

“Where? What hurts?” he asks, concerned, fingers gently massaging.

“I need to touch,” Hermione tells him, hand already straying to pluck at one of her nipples shyly.

He sucks in a breath, pupils dilating. “That’s okay, you can touch yourself.”

“No—not yet.”

“Granger, there is nothing to be shy of. I’ll wait to help, but you don’t have to.” He tries to reassure her.

“Will you hold me?” she asks instead of continuing the exploration of her needy body. Her fingers grip his exposed skin. “It hurts.”

“Come here,” he agrees immediately, drawing her into his chest. She burrows in, slotting their legs together, tucking her nose into his scent gland. The proximity is divine and chases away some of the emptiness. His arms curl behind her, securing her to him. “Better?”

She nods, instinct prodding her to drag her tongue along the skin of his neck gently, wanting to taste the alpha. Draco groans in response, clothed hips bucking into her, making her painfully aware of the state she’s put him in.

Pride she’d done *that* to him fills her, and she feels her omega magic pushing forward more quickly than normal, readying to eclipse her presence of mind.

Needy and aching, she adjusts herself slightly until his thigh is conveniently between her own and is pressed against her damp center, offering friction. Draco releases a choked noise as she mewls, rocking gently against him.

“Granger—”

“Please. Hurts.” She whines, desperately. He presses his thigh more firmly against her center. Her vision tinges with darkness, subspace creeping in as small jolts of pleasure from her clit combat the cramps in her lower abdomen.

“That’s it, you’re alright, sweet witch,” Draco soothes her, encouraging her self-pleasure.

“Please, please, please,” she murmurs like a prayer beside his ear, her fingernails digging into him as she gets closer and closer to the edge.

“I’ve got you,” the wizard assures her, still gentle and stationary as she rocks against him, fulfilling his agreement to wait. She can feel how wound up he is over it as she moans in his ear.

“More,” she begs as she reaches the near peak of orgasm. Draco rolls her onto him, a hand going to her hip to help her rock. It’s enough. Falling into her orgasm, she trembles and drags her teeth along the wizard’s neck, making him shiver.

His hands flex against her, “I’ve got you, Hermione.”

The rumble of her name sends fire through her and pushes her the rest of the way into the dark of subspace as she rides the bliss of her completion and the safety of Draco’s arms.

Chapter End Notes

So close HEHEHEHEHEHEHE

what do y'all think?

Chapter 11: Chapter Eleven

Chapter Summary

Heat, and all the fun things that come with it 8====>

Chapter Notes

Y'all, this one was a bit of a struggle to write. I had to do it in several sittings and I don't have it in me to read it through because it feels LONG, I mean, 14 pages google docs size 10 font long. FFS. Anyway, if you notice any glaring errors, I'd appreciate a shout. Or if I've forgotten to end a sentence (I was jumping around a bit... it's happened before lol), just anything wrong formatting/writing/sense wise.... you get it, thanks

Love you all, happy reading

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Thursday, April 22, 2004 cont...

As the witch pants against his neck, trembling from her orgasm, Draco fights his instincts to touch her, to savor her. *Merlin*, she was brilliant and so lovely and small and she felt too bloody good against him. Like she was made to lay just as she was, bare and pliant and melting into his flesh. If this was all she ever gave him—her feverish body pressed firmly against his, the sounds she was making in his ear, the gentle flexing of her fingers against him to reassure herself he was there beneath her, like she needed under his skin—it would be enough.

The privilege it was to see her through this, to experience her trust in him, and the vulnerability of this time for her... it made his instincts flare up, motivating him to be so, very good to her. To give her everything she needed. To give her anything she wanted—which was for him to wait, to not touch her until her omega magic was in control for her.

He could do that, he could wait. He would. But the urge to touch and lick and cover and claim filled his chest to the brink as his blood attempted to overfill another portion of his anatomy.

Shutting his eyes he imagines he's been petrified and tries to convince his muscles of it, staying as still as possible to keep his word to his witch.

Granger whimpers—tensing—her thighs clamping, and he can't help but drag his hands up from her hips, rubbing her bare back in what he hopes is a welcome way. He convinces himself he is only soothing her, murmuring praise in her ear, "You did so well. Just a little longer, love."

Shivering against him, she nuzzles closer, mumbling something.

"What's that, love?"

"So 'mpty—hurts." Her voice is soft, his heart pangs.

"I know, I know it hurts. It will stop soon, I—"

"*Help me.*"

Going rigid at her tone, Draco shuffles their bodies enough to look the witch in the eye. Granger's pupils are blown nearly as large as her pretty brown irises and the glaze to them makes it very clear what's happened.

Pulse and cock jumping at the prospect, he sucks in a harsh breath through his teeth—she'd already succumbed to her omega magic. *Was he allowed to help now? Is this what she meant?* He needed to be sure of it, he couldn't betray her requests. But he so badly wanted to help her. He wanted to make this good, he wanted to show her how good he could be to her, how good he would be for her.

Searching her eyes, he looks for any recognition or awareness, "You still with me, Granger?"

Keening, she pulls her face from between his fingers and moves to kiss his throat, managing to plant two gentle marks against his skin near his swelling scent gland. He forces himself to stop her, flipping their positions and laying her down beneath him carefully.

Her dazed eyes staring up at him affect him as having her sole attention commonly does, he feels his body flushing as she squirms and a low sound of protest escapes her parted lips at being pinned there but not touched. She arches gently off the blankets, pushing her chest up to him in offering. He reaches for her and she stills in anticipation, but his palm cups her face instead of her perfect proffered breasts.

Tracing her cheekbone with gentle fingers, attempting to keep focused as she again wriggles, he asks, "What do you need?"

Her soft eyebrows come together and her fingers scrabble at his waist to pull his weight down on top of her. "*Alpha, please. I need, I need—*"

Granger's words break off into a small, frustrated cry.

"I'm right here," he assures her, bringing their faces close with confidence knowing she was fully gone to her omega magic and well into subspace. She drags her nose along his, eyes fluttering shut as she curls her arms and legs around his back, trapping him against her.

Allowing things to move in this direction, he lets his weight down and she sighs out a contented breath, doing her best to rub herself against his hardness trapped between their bodies. The relief her first orgasm provided had hardly done anything to sate her needs at present and without his active participation in the effort to make her come, she had to resort to stimulating herself.

Spurred by this knowledge, and Granger's permission to aid her once safely insulated by her magic, Draco braces himself over the omega witch and flexes his hips for her, rubbing her clit through sodden knickers until she softly gasps out a second orgasm.

As she shivers through it, he finally allows himself to taste her hot skin, starting at her jaw, kissing across her throat and clavicle—sure to avoid her protruding glands.

Securing one of her pebbled nipples between his lips, he laves his tongue over the peak of her soft breast as his fingers attend the other. Granger moans, fingers threading into his hair, tugging at the long blonde strands, nails biting his scalp as he works her into an additional orgasm. She is magnificent.

“ Please, s'mpty, ” she slurs once the aftershocks subside, eyes lidded as she looks down at him, bucking her hips into his chest gently.

Kissing a trail across her stomach he hooks his fingers beneath her soaked knickers and sits back, peeling them down her legs, tossing them somewhere behind them. Draco works his way back up, kissing the inside of her calf, then knee, then thigh until he reaches her scent glands there. Mouthing one, he finally experiences the essence he'd been chasing since the day he presented from one of its most potent sources.

Granger moans and tugs his mouth closer to her dripping cunt by his hair. He groans against her at the sensation and complies, moving his attentions and dragging his tongue up her drenched folds, earning a new gush of the heady slick. His eyes roll back and he presses deeper into her cunt, burying his face between her legs, sucking and caressing and licking until her legs clamp shut around his ears and she falls into her next orgasm.

He knew in theory how easy it should be for an omega to orgasm during heat, but to coax them from the witch was an entirely different privilege. He understood now why Theodore encouraged him to allow his building rut—as a wizard he would never keep up with the witch's needs, but with his alpha magic sustaining him he would.

Kissing the gland in her other thigh once she releases him, Draco crawls up between her legs, working his pants off his hips. His cock springs up against his stomach, swollen and proud.

Carefully he kicks the undergarments off his legs to the foot of the bed, his eyes locked on his witch as she stares at his cock already weeping for her. Whimpering softly, her legs fall open, her body going slack in anticipation.

His voice is rough as he offers, “Do you want my fingers first—”

“ No! ” she cries, eyes glistening.

Draco nods and only drags his fingers between her legs to collect enough of her slick to lubricate himself—though he doubts it is needed. Coating his cock, he stifles his sounds and avoids touching his glans in fear of completing before even entering the perfect witch beneath him. Then, he shuffles forward until his tip is slotted against her warm, wet opening—taking a moment to commit this to memory.

Granger stares at him with her glossy brown eyes, a tremor in her muscles betraying just how hard she tries to keep still for him as her instincts tell her to. Her arms are draped around her head like a halo, helping to expose more of her creamy complexion in the dim light. She's flushed from the apples of her cheeks to the peaks of her breasts which heave up and down as he watches. He notices moles dotted across her ribs and chest and thinks he'll endeavor to kiss each one later.

Trailing his eyes back to her face, he wished her curls were free. They'd always been loose when he thought about her like this—his brilliant witch.

Finally, she whines in impatience, spurring him from fantasy and into action.

Holding his painfully hard cock in one hand and one of her hips in the other, he begins to press into her ready cunt.

Granger's breathing sharply stops and he looks up at her as he continues to sink in, watching as her eyes roll back and jaw goes slack. The wet warmth enveloping him is nearly enough to push him over the edge, his body trembling as he resists thrusting forward more forcefully instead enjoying the feeling of her tight channel opening up around him, welcoming him in, accepting him like he was always meant to be there.

In what feels like hours but is only seconds, his cock finally sinks the last centimeters inside and he leans over her, basking in the feeling of being fully seated inside the witch, the heat of her threatening to force him out of his body. The softest of moans escapes Granger and suddenly she's fluttering around him, pushed over the edge without him even moving.

Groaning, as he resists fucking her through the orgasm—still trying to be gentle as they warm up and his alpha magic builds in his chest—he reaches out and cups one of her breasts, playing with her pink nipple, causing her to mewl breathlessly and clench on him.

Choking, he feels his knot growing already and sucks in a fortifying breath, resolved to wait.

But as soon as his witch is through her orgasm, she tilts her hips, drawing him ever so slightly deeper, causing them both to moan.

“Granger, Merlin fuck.” Spurred to action he gasps, hiking her leg up onto his hip as he braces himself above her and gives her one firm rock of his hips, punching a desperate cry from her. “Thank you. Thank you for choosing me. Thank you, thank you...”

He pulls out most of the way then quickly slides back in, finding a rhythm as his knot continues to balloon at the base of his cock. It only takes a few thrusts for it to start catching at her entrance, tugging out and popping in with each flex of his hips. Granger lets out a little sound each time, soft and low— *uh, uh, uh*.

“That’s it, almost there, love,” he grunts, kissing beside her ear as her heels dig into his bum, helping him thrust. “That’s—”

His knot pulls but does not escape on his next rock and Granger moans in his ear, clamping down on his cock, orgasming almost violently, her nails biting into his forearms where she holds him.

Launched over the edge into his orgasm, he rocks one last time, burying in as deep as possible, his knot sealing his cock inside of her as she squirms and flutters around him.

Draco comes so hard that he's convinced he's died.

Blinking back into awareness several heartbeats later now pressed chest to chest with the omega witch as she manages an additional orgasm, Draco groans, flexing his hips to prolong her pleasure, stirring up his hot spend deep in her belly.

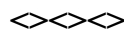
Coupling with Granger—knotting her—should be considered a religious experience, he thinks as he laves her throat with his tongue, nipping below her ear to leave a mark. Her gland pulses temptingly centimeters away from his lips and he forces himself to pull back in case he does something foolish.

Slipping his arms around her and rolling until she’s atop him to make the mating gland less accessible, gravity forces Granger more firmly onto his knot and he moans, spurting inside of her a second time. She’s boneless against him, panting helplessly into his neck as she comes again from him releasing inside of her.

Petting a hand down her plait, Draco pants, knowing they’ll be locked together for another several minutes at the very least, and tries to ensure his witch is comfortable with how she rests. “Granger—”

Whining softly in what sounds like a protest at him speaking, she nuzzles deeper into the crook made by his shoulder. He concedes to laying there, basking in their afterglow, attempting to convince his brain this is reality. But the alpha magic rising in his chest, preparing to take over and rut to care for his omega lulls him out of thinking too hard about anything. His singular focus should be his witch, and she was.

Being happier than any imagined fantasy had ever made him became an afterthought as he closed his eyes for just a moment, dragging his fingers across Granger’s perfect figure, eager to explore every morsel of her.



Thrusting hard and slow into his omega from behind, Draco drags his hands over the globes of her pretty arse, and she whines, rocking herself gently back on him. Her flesh was still burning hot, her slick making the smack of their hips together noisy and lewd. He loved all of it, he loved her.

Leaning over her to press kisses up her spine, Draco reaches an arm beneath the trembling witch, fingers rubbing over her clit just once and she’s coming, clenching down so hard on

him he can hardly pull out before his knot catches and swells up, locking them together again. He comes, stilling and riding out the bliss of being inside of her cunt, nipping at her shoulder. She moans weakly, tightening impossibly more around him.

Gathering her up as she goes boneless beneath him, he lays them on their sides to not crush her and tucks an arm under his head, careful not to disturb the structure of their nest and risk upsetting his omega.

It was a futile effort as the pillows and linens moved as they did, changing slightly each time he knotted her, migrating to the edges. The materials were now heady with the smell of their sex and her heat.

Draco's alpha magic surges at the observation, pleased with the mixture of pheromones enclosed with them. Granger comes again as he rocks his hips, punctuating his feelings. She exposes her throat in submission to show her pleasure and he delivers a quick suck on her mating gland as a reward but doesn't allow himself to linger, even as his jaw aches to bite down and drain it—making her his.

A half-hour later as his knot begins to soften inside of her, a gush of his spend and her slick escapes past and she moans, clenching down to try to keep it inside. He thrusts gently to help, and she lightly orgasms.

"You're so beautiful," he groans into her ear, rewarding her with more soft thrusts, prolonging her satisfaction. Granger whines breathily at the compliment, body trembling where she lies in front of him. But she isn't yet ready to go again as Draco pulls out, cock still hard and waiting for her next surge of need.

Rolling her onto her back, Draco moves between her legs and sits back on his haunches. The crooks of her knees cradle his hips as she pants soft breaths, boneless and messy and gorgeous. Devouring her image, he runs a palm over the plains of her feverish skin in quiet worship. His witch arches into his touch, letting her body be explored in whatever way he wishes.

Her knees fall open in offering despite her developing need for recovery between knots. Her cunt lips are pink and puffy, shiny with her slick and his spend. Draco touches her there adoringly, pulling her gently apart and bending to press a kiss to her clit which makes her jolt and come.

Granger was a drug he'd never sober from. For the rest of his life, he'd be waiting for his next hit. Over and over, a never-ending cycle of need for her.

A sudden *pop* disrupts his rut-logged mind and the still air in the room.

Reacting, his alpha magic prickles across his skin, emanating from him to cocoon his witch protectively as he creeps to the foot of the bed to investigate. Granger whines in protest as she loses his touch, keening softly as he cautiously sticks his head out between the heavy drapes enclosing their nest.

Granger's elf, Dally, stands in the corner of the room by the table, eyes watching the nest, waiting for someone to emerge.

"You can't be in here," Draco grunts, barely restraining his alpha magic from lashing out at the intruder. "You need to leave."

"Dally gives Missy potions—"

"*Leave*," he snarls.

The elf, visibly upset by his instruction, looks at the potions and water pitcher on the table beside her. "Missy needs—"

"If we need you, I will call."

"But—"

Granger cries out from within the nest—not out of need but in pain.

"Out!" Draco spares the elf no more time and returns to his witch who writhes in the blankets, twisting and desperate. Her eyes squeezed shut as she tries to sate herself unsuccessfully on her fingers, body shivering violently.

"I'm here," Draco reassures her as he pulls out her slim digits and slides his cock in place of them, immediately stilling the witch. The shivering stops. He sucks her fingers into his mouth, cleaning them then kissing her palm in apology as he thrusts long and deep. "I'm sorry. I'm here."

Her responding whine is unintelligible but doesn't sound pained—a relief to him. He fucks into her quickly to build his knot for her and helps her to orgasm.

As she clings to him, forcing his face into her mating gland, his hips stutter. Dull, pulsating pain radiates through his jaw, instinct and his riled magic push him to bite into it—into her.

Granger proffers it so nicely, *she's so good*. Too good for him.

Try not to mate me, her voice echoes inside his head.

Clenching his teeth, he picks up the pace he's set, knot-catching.

Draco focuses everything on making her finish again before he does—focuses on her pleasure and need instead of the tempting gland centimeters from his lips. *One small bite and she'd be his forever. She'd be safe forever.*

Anger over the situation, over the limits that have been set, over the fear in his omega and the *choices* she's had to make starts to blind him. His alpha magic surges and pushes and begs him to let up control.

Normally he allowed his magic complete say during a rut but he couldn't this time. He couldn't risk it, not with her. However, it was becoming onerous to focus and maintain

reasonable thought given something so precious to care for. Something he's coveted for years. Someone his instincts chant at him to claim.

As his witch mewls and gasps out an additional orgasm, her nails scrape across his shoulders searching for purchase as she crashes over and over the edge. Her cunt flutters around him, around his ballooning knot.

With her lips pressed against his scent gland, Draco jerks forward, coming as his teeth sink into flesh.

Friday, April 23, 2004

Rubbing small circles into Granger's naval area, Draco slowly slides in and out of her, reveling at the small bulge that appears below her belly button in pace with his hips. She pants, mewling softly and keeping as still as possible like he's told her to. The contraceptive salve dries slowly on their skin, his fingers sticky with it as they wait.

Granger squirms with need, hips flexing up against him, forcing him deeper on his next thrust, pushing her over into orgasm. The clench of her around him starts his knot catching, and before the salve fully dries they're locked together, Draco coming in time with her trembling aftershocks.

"Granger," he hums once they've both been sated, sliding a palm up her now dry skin between her breasts, resting it there. Her slick production was starting to slow which means she is becoming dehydrated. She'd be sick later in the heat if he didn't get her to drink now. "Come here, love."

Warm brown eyes half-lidded and dazed watch him as he slides his free arm under her, pressing his bare chest to hers, his knot forced deeper with the action making them both jolt.

In as smooth a motion as possible, he scoops her up against him and leans back until he's sitting. Gravity forces Granger more heavily onto his knot and she orgasms again with an accompanying moan low and sweet in his ear. His body clenches as he comes deep inside her once again.

Trying to ignore the distraction of her cunt milking him, Draco shakily reaches to the side of the nest where he's put the salve jar and a bottle of water while she sags against him. Uncapping the water, he tips it to her lips, coaxing her to drink but it dribbles off her chin and down their chests. He tries twice more with the same result.

"Love, you have to drink for me," he pleads with her, using his arm around her to help her hold her head up. She whines in protest, trying to tuck into the nook his throat and shoulder make.

Capping the water, he adjusts his hold of her, running both his hands up her back, making their bodies flush. He kisses her cheek, shutting his eyes, basking in the unity of their bodies. There had to be an easier way to do this—an easier way to help her help herself.

After a little while, as his knot softens, she begins to rock her hips, moaning softly as she fucks herself on him. Jolts of pleasure shoot up his spine and he pants into her throat, jaw beginning to ache again with the desire to claim her.

He lifts his forearm—already littered with bites from the first twenty-some hours of the heat—and forces himself to sink his teeth into his own skin instead of the witch as she begins to clench around him, nearing her edge.

Ensuring she's stable as he leans back from her tempting throat, laying flat on the bed, she continues to ride him, her hands planted firmly on his chest and head thrown back in ecstasy as she coaxes a continuous orgasm from herself. Rocking and rocking and shaking through the stimulation until she's again exhausted her need and his knot is renewed inside her tight cunt.

Lowering herself to his chest, Granger tucks her crown of curls loose from her plait under his chin. She sighs, content, and he finally releases his jaw, putting his wounded arm out of the way above his head and setting his other hand on the center of her back.

He would need to treat his wounds soon. They hadn't been bleeding much due to his magic but they'd scar if left.

However, that wasn't the most pressing of his worries. Granger needed to drink to prevent cramping and other symptoms from ailing her in the coming hours. He needed to think up some way to convince her that wouldn't betray her need or trust. She'd been accepting of his help thus far without much coaxing so it was strange this was different.

Granger's breathing is soft and warm on his bare skin, causing goose pimples to form and stand his hair on end. The weight of her atop him brings him comfort he wasn't aware he was seeking. Reassurance that she was there, safe with him, cared for.

She would survive this, he would do anything for her.

Saturday, April 24, 2004

A dozen failed attempts at helping his witch to drink had led Draco to the likely conclusion it wasn't that she wouldn't or didn't want to, but that she was struggling to swallow. Her mating glands, which usually resided beneath the skin unnoticed and hard to locate without extensive stimulation, had swelled in heat until they protruded from her otherwise unblemished throat.

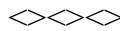
It would explain her reluctance and provided a new symptom for him to ease. Something he was more than happy to endeavor as they must be causing her great discomfort. He'd not seen or come across record of any so visible in his limited research of omegas and heat. But the angry appearance of them made it even more apparent how desperate her body was to be claimed and cared for by an alpha—delaying mating for so long had left every inch of Granger overreactive and encouraging of his attentions.

So, the next time she shuddered through an orgasm on his cock, boneless and relaxed in their nest, he took great care gently probing one of her glands, knowing it would be oversensitive. Upon contact she keens and tightens on him, knees pulling up and eyes rolling back. But it doesn't seem to hurt her. He coos as he works his thumb against the lump in a small circle, "It's alright love."

Slowly the fluid collected in the gland begins to drain into surrounding tissue for the time being, the size of it shrinking the longer he rubs it. Granger pants under the attention, whining and flushing red. The entire time her cunt is clamped around him, unwilling to let up even as his knot begins to soften.

Once he's nearly massaged the gland back under the skin, he finds the bottle of water and tips it against her parted lips, encouraging her gently to sip, being careful not to pour too much into her mouth at one time.

Granger finally swallows. Relief courses through him as he feeds her the rest of it.



Granger's breathing is slow, her body relaxed, and her expression peaceful where she rests next to him, knees drawn up and hands folded near her face—small and trusting of his sentry over her. Dragging a hand over her bare skin still flushed with fever, he leans down and presses a gentle kiss against her shoulder.

From her pheromones and newfound ability to sleep—which combats the need that compels her to constantly be knotted by him—his alpha magic knows to ease up. The ebb of it releases the tension in Draco's body, lessens his urges to protect and claim, and allows him better control of himself and his mind. But with his rut instincts fading, his bodily needs would return. Food would instead sustain his energy and he would need to expel the resulting waste the normal way. Which meant leaving the nest for short periods.

Not having dared with his omega conscious except for when the elf invaded upon them at a bad time, he hesitates now. Summoning things—like he had their contraceptive and water—would not be enough going forward, but his absence could foster feelings of insecurity in his omega. The risk weighed on him. However, inspecting her as she slumbers, he finds that Granger seems deep in sleep and a very, very brief departure from her could be tolerated.

Slipping carefully out of the nest, he stretches up, cracking his spine. The difference in lighting between their dim and comfortable nest and the warmly lit room is disorienting for only a moment. He also finds it strange to be on his feet after—*what was it*—three days?

He quickly goes to the loo, having a wee and cleaning his wounded arm under the tap, before wandering back inside the room and to the table in the corner to inspect what heat supplies are left strewn among their things. There is Pepper Up, pain potions, calming draughts, and water, but no food.

"Dally?" he calls softly into the quiet. The elf pops in moments later, a scowl on her face. Not feeling so riled and protective now that Granger was through the worst of it, he crouches—

ignoring his nudity—to the elf’s height. “I would like to apologize for how I spoke to you before. I am sincerely sorry.”

“How is my Missy? She not takes all her potions,” The elf squints, folding her little arms across her chest. Her threat to harm him jumps to mind and he thinks he might become quite fond of the creature.

“Granger is sleeping now, finally, and she hasn’t been in any pain,” Draco shares, pushing a hand back through his sweat-damp hair. “As soon as she shows some sign, I will give her the potion.”

“Sleepin?” The elf softens, “You be takin good cares of her.”

“I’m trying my very best.” Draco sighs, “I know it has been your responsibility since you became her elf to see her through this time each cycle. It wasn’t my intention to exclude you before. I have much to learn from you, and I hope you will help me help her now that she’s through the first stage.”

The elf stares, ears wiggling as she thinks, and finally agrees, “She is needin waters.”

Draco nods, “Yes, I’ve been successful getting her to drink—her slick production is normal.”

“Good. Yous be needin foods?”

“Potter and Theodore told me to ask you what she will eat. Whatever it is, I will make do.”

“Dally will brings it.” The elf pops away without warning and pops back a few moments later with a tray that floats over to the table, settling silently. “Little bits for my Missy. Lots of waters.”

“Thank you, Dally.”

“Yous be needin things?”

“Not right now.” He shakes his head.

“Dally is welcome. Yous be callin.” She leaves the room with another soft *pop* .

Inspecting the tray on the table Draco discovers a bowl of crustless bread chunks, bite-sized balls of white rice, cubes of cooked chicken, sliced banana, cooked apple slices, and a dish of cream he discovers is yogurt by taste. He picks at the spread, swallowing morsels of food to sate his stomach as his alpha magic stops dulling the empty ache of it.

As he is filling a small bowl with an assortment for Granger, he hears the panicked whine of his witch waking without him beside her. He hurries back to the nest, abandoning the food.

Granger sits on her knees, tears in her eyes when he presses back through the gap in the heavy curtains, reassuring her, “I’m right here.”

She reaches for him, pulling herself flush to his chest, lips dragging along his pulse as she stifles a small sob in his throat. He cradles her head, curls tangled beneath his hand as she squirms closer to him, nails biting at his back. “You’re safe, I’m not going anywhere.”

Holding her until she calms down is downright blissful. When she breathes, her warm flesh rhythmically presses against him. The scent of her slick is heady in the enclosed space and it doesn’t take long before she is dripping onto his lap. Then she is shifting so her thighs bracket his hips and her wet cunt is perfectly aligned against the tip of his erect cock. It takes a single, tandem rock of their hips to sink inside of her entirely. His witch sighs gently in his ear, soothed and calm.



He’s still inside of her when she wiggles closer in her sleep, his come slipping past his softening knot, wetting the insides of her thighs. With gentle fingers, he massages it into her glands, scenting her with himself possessively—as far as he has gone in the way of claiming her.

Granger moans and clenches on him, squeezing out more of his spend past his semi.

Without his religious use of the contraceptive, Draco is sure Granger would be pregnant by the end of this heat. At the rate of their coupling and the extraordinary amount of come he has fucked into her, there was little chance of the negative.

The idea of her having his children draws a pleased grumble from him and he curls her closer into his chest. But it wasn’t the time, he couldn’t know it was something she wanted. It wasn’t to be decided now, or by him—he could only hope their use of the salve was enough to leave the witch a choice in the matter.

Sunday, April 25, 2004

With gentle coaxing, Draco can feed his witch small bites of food—only managing a handful at a time before she succumbs to sleep. This time, in the few minutes between the swelling of his knot and Granger’s dosing, he decides to offer her the Pepper Up potion.

Though her mating glands are less and less full each time they reappear after massaging them, and he was glad to have figured out the remedy to her sole refusal so early on, he feared her present energy wasn’t enough to sustain her until the end of her heat. The potion, he hoped, would combat the inevitable exhaustion yet to claim her.

Nosing into the crook of his neck, Granger hums gently, sated by her orgasm and the knot locking them together, and well on her way to sleep.

“Love?” he murmurs against her sweaty temple, kissing her cheek as her arms wrap weakly around his shoulders. “Will you drink this for me?”

Dazed eyes blink up at him but her mouth falls open obediently. *Merlin, help him.*

Cradling her jaw, he unstoppers the vial and carefully pours the potion into her mouth, wiping up a drip from her lip with his thumb and putting it in his own mouth. His witch swallows, wincing before nuzzling back into him, sucking a few marks along the column of his pale, stubbled throat.

Draco groans, letting his head hang back under her attentions. They increase in intensity as the initial boost from the potion hits her. Soon she's rocking against his knot and he chokes on his pleasure, curling her tight to his chest as he lies her back in the nest, settling atop her, thrusting.

Granger keens, nails dragging at his shoulders as he circles his hips, grinding his knot inside of her, forcing an orgasm from her that rolls her eyes into the back of her head. He comes inside of her again and ignores the slight rawness of it—the overstimulation on his cock.

Breathing deeply from her mating gland, he kisses it gently. The urge to bite down, pop, and drain it is still present as he licks the hot source of her scent, but with his alpha magic in the background, he's able to control the urge without sinking his teeth into himself.

He's grateful for it, his forearm is littered in two dozen or more bite marks and tender from the abuse of his teeth. But despite the pain and his neglect—guaranteeing scaring—he couldn't be more proud of them.

Monday, April 26, 2004

They sleep at the same time. If the need to leave the nest arises, Draco tries to do it soon after her breathing evens out after learning through trial and error that it is the best time. Too close to the next wave of need and she wakes, alerted to his absence. Most often though, he does not need to depart their nest and he is woken by the witch beginning to squirm in his arms, ready for his knot again.

Each time she sleeps and wakes, the time between knots grows longer and longer. It's encouraging that her heat is progressing and without the suffering described to him—even as their success ushers the end of their time together. Draco tries not to focus on it, tries to keep the hurt from his heart, and savors the witch while he has her. He would worry once the fever fully burned through her how to help her realize just how thoroughly and ardently he loves her.

Tuesday, April 27, 2004

When Granger wakes, it isn't with a need for his knot but in tears, her entire body trembling. The shock of being woken by her unexpectedly and in such a manner doesn't give him much time to react thoughtfully.

Instead, he grabs her close—crushing her to his chest—and hums beside her ear, “Please don't cry, love. What's wrong? What do you need?” When her only response is a low whine,

he adds, “ *Show me .*”

She squirms and claws at his chest, worming her body closer, forcing her way into the crevice between his body and the bed. Her nails leave red marks on his pale skin and she keens, grip tight on his bicep as she tries to pull him over her body.

“Careful,” he murmurs to her, rolling over as commanded despite his concerns of crushing her smaller body beneath him. As soon as he’s covering her, she begins to tug him down onto herself. With gentle touches, he brushes her matted hair back from her face, leaning down to press kisses against her clavicle and shoulders, letting his weight down just enough to pin her beneath him. She stills, her breathing evening out. “There, is that better? Is this what you need?”

Gracelessly she tugs her arms out from between them, catching him beneath the jaw as she snakes them around the back of his neck, pulling, wanting the rest of his weight. Blinking past the shock of the accidental strike, he attempts to find a different solution to the apparent suffocation she desires.

With a gentle rocking to their arrangement, he reaches across the nest and manages to pull some of the pillows and blankets closer, tucking them around the witch, securing her beneath him—what he thinks she needs from him. Once thoroughly buried by him and their nesting materials, she stops tugging behind his neck, melting into her place on the bed. Her glazed brown eyes shut and she lets out a long sigh, falling right back to sleep.

Draco lets out an amused puff of breath—the anxiety that clutched him upon waking fades.

Cautiously, he works out how best to rest the remainder of his weight on and beside the witch so her breathing doesn’t become restricted. He manages to rest alongside the witch and blankets her with the rest of his body, keeping her firmly pressed into the bed.

Wednesday, April 28, 2004

She’s squirming again beneath him, half-lidded eyes on him as he wakes. Her hands find their way to his jaw, cradling his cheeks with curling fingers. Granger thrusts her hips up against him, panting hot breath against his face, making her need known. Shifting onto his elbows, he slides a hand down the plane of her soft stomach, delving between her legs to hoist one onto his hip.

Spread open for him, he uses the same hand to quickly stroke himself hard and push his tip against her wet opening, still weeping lightly as the heat drains from her. As she tilts her hips up to meet him, he presses inside slowly, spearing her open—hot, tight, heavenly.

He groans into her throat, kissing her mating gland longingly. One of these times she wakes him will be the last, and he’s determined to make each good and indulge her as she deserves to be. He moves slowly, the urgency drained from their coupling a few knots ago.

Kissing along her throat, he lets her direct him where she wants using her gentle grip of his chin. His attention remains focused on her gland, tongue laving at the thin skin above the sensitive node.

He wishes—not for the first time—she’d chosen him under better circumstances, and forever.

Thursday, April 29, 2004

Curled around his witch, almost on top of her by how she forced her body between his chest and the mattress, Draco blinked awake from his light dozing, noticing a change in her breathing. He rubs a soothing hand over her ribcage, fingers bumping across the bones beneath her skin as he begins to hush her in soft tones.

She lets out a weak sound, turning her face out of the mattress and looking up at him, “*Draco?*”

Chapter End Notes

Please leave a comment, and let me know what you think! Was it yay or nay?

I feel like I'm just glad it's over haha. I haven't written smut in so long. I'm so sorry if it's trash lol

Thanks for sticking with me! I think we're within 10 chapters of the end, but I'm awful at guestimating, its probably like, 15, again, don't hold me to it...

Love you all, happy days/nights/reading/commenting/mental breakdowns (me)

Chapter 12: Chapter Twelve

Chapter Summary

Aftercare

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Thursday, April 29, 2004

Waking up slowly, Hermione allows her mind time to catch up to everything she is feeling.

It was soft where she lay, warm, and her body felt heavy, useless—like she would never be able to move again. But not because of pain or exhaustion, because she was completely free of the aches and tension that seemed to plague her in daily life. Her muscles felt buttery and loose, tender from touches and warmth.

It was an unfamiliar sensation.

This moment, this first recognition of herself, was usually accompanied by her flesh threatening to peel off. Itchiness and burning, aching in her chest from sobbing so hard.

Now her breathing was easy, and she didn't taste the iron of her blood. Her cunt and glands were sensitive, but not pulsating in pain. And though she felt exhaustion in every small movement, she *could* move.

Relief overcomes her. She is alive. She survived.

Hermione can't help but begin to cry, her body trembling with sobs until the solid warmth behind her stirs. The arm molded around her waist pulls her close, and a breath puffs against her naked shoulder moments before a gentle kiss is pressed there. The kisses continue between murmurs she knows are intended to comfort her. The sounds resemble language, but she's unable to make sense of it just yet. She shuts her eyes tight and tries to sink into the safety offered to her, welcoming it.

She wants to live in the feeling.

... ..

“You're okay, love. You did it, you've done so well.”

Tucking his witch more securely between his body and the bed, she begins to calm, her breathing evens out again.

Granger's awareness came in waves, pushing her toward the surface and taking her back under. The heat was nearly over—fever fully burned out of her, and her needs abated. He could feel the contrasting coolness of her skin against his as the post-heat chills set in—she had survived. All that was left was for her to fully come out of her magic.

He was hopeful for it, and at the same time, he dreaded it.

<.:>.:>.:>

Blinking through the fog, Hermione squirms, taking a slow, deep breath as she gingerly rolls over in the arms of— *alpha* .

Mind sharpening, she becomes acutely focused on the body encasing hers. Strong pale limbs heavy overtop her, securing her in their nest. His thick musk in the enclosed space is comforting, and she wiggles her way closer, pressing their chests together and wedging her face into the space between his chin and the bed. Shy hands snake their way up his sides, holding his larger figure close. Draco shifts in his sleep, winding her nearer.

Content to stay just there, she uses her newfound awareness to process where she is and what she feels.

Normally, she remembered little to nothing of her heat, losing days to subspace—this heat wasn't much different. She had lost track of time fairly quickly. The last thing she recalled was her magic surging, ingraining an urgency to be touched by Draco that eclipsed all other needs. Then, begging, which she felt surprisingly unashamed about. And, he'd said her name.

Her heart raced, remembering the sound of it coming from him— *Hermione*.

There were only flashes after that. Namely, his eyes. Looking at her like, like she'd hung the stars and moon in the sky herself. The grey of his irises was soft and warm like full thunderclouds threatening to burst on a hot summer day. Or the plume of steam from a boiling cauldron in a dim laboratory. It was comforting and... reverent.

Held by it, she left her body, existing solely under his regard. It was foreign to her to feel seen. To be so exposed without the fear and anxiety that accompanied the *knowing*. Those eyes followed her into the safety of subspace.

Now, once again conscious, she was content and surprised and grateful and nervous. She hated that she lost the rest of the time, hated that she didn't know the date or how long she'd been trapped in the dark. Hated not knowing what happened between them. She wanted more than anything to remember. She needed more than what was left. The blank in her mind was unsettling and—

With a deep breath, she takes account of her body and immediately knows Draco has been good to her—very good. Never in the history of her heats has she come out so unharmed. Though she was exhausted and would require help in some regards for the following days, she could feel that her body would obey her. Her muscles wouldn't spasm, her joints wouldn't groan, and she wouldn't recoil from texture and touch—too sensitive to stand either.

Physically, she was in better health than when she submitted to the wizard's care. Emotionally, she wasn't yet sure. There is a ledge very near, and she is on the verge of tumbling over it—it felt inevitable.

Nosing into the wizard holding her, Hermione grips him, wanting him awake to fill in the events of their time spent together, wanting him entirely oblivious so they could stay like this, wanting inside his skin to feel closer to him, wanting inside his head to understand where they went from here. She hadn't ever understood her designation before this moment. Not properly. She didn't understand the role of an alpha in her life—the need.

She did now. She needed one—she wanted *him*.

Draco's breath catches beside her ear, and he stirs, nuzzling the side of her face, hands rubbing along her spine, tracing the ridges. He hums gently, a sound intended to soothe her. She notices her nails have embedded themselves in his waist.

Sucking in a breath, she corrects herself, flexing her fingers open to remove the tension. The action prompts her wizard to fully wake, shuffling away from her slightly.

Desperate to stay close, Hermione lets out a pitiful keen of protest, "*Please.*"

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Squinting awake at the witch in his arms, Draco notices clear brown eyes watching him through wet eyelashes. Granger's chin wobbles as he makes enough space to properly look at her beneath him—this might be it, she might be back.

"Hey there, Granger." She flinches at his voice, a flash of devastation blinking across her pretty features before smoothing as she hides her face in the mattress, sniffing. Cupping her chin in a hand that dwarfs her, he draws her gaze back, "Is something wrong? What can I do?"

With a quick breath, she worries her lip and blinks new wetness from her eyes, "M'fine."

"You aren't."

Her shoulders curl forward in an attempt to make herself smaller beneath him. He waits, rubbing an arc into her jaw until it stops trembling, and she glances at him again, still lucid.

"You called me..." she trails off, her look becoming distant. "Maybe I imagined it."

"What did I call you?"

A warm flush rises in her face, her eyes shut, "By my name."

"Granger?" he inquires, and she flinches again. *Not that then.*

It hits him.

"*Hermione?*"

His witch whines softly, melting into the bed.

“You like me calling you Hermione?”

“Please,” she begs, eyes blinking back open, glazed with obvious pleasure. His heart jumps knowing she’s so affected by him speaking her name.

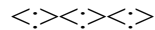
“I will call you whatever you’d like, love,” he assures her, glancing her over now that she’s awake and responsive. “Is that all? How are you feeling? Are you in any pain?”

Her fingers on his waist curl, sending a thrill down his spine, “I feel... good.”

It was all he wanted to hear upon her waking—that he’d made a difference. He felt relieved.

Her voice is quiet as she confesses, “I... I can’t leave the nest yet. And I want you to stay with me.”

Guiding her back into his chest, he shakes his head, “I’m not going anywhere.”



Dragging her fingers across the scars littering her alpha’s chest, Hermione watches the wizard sleep. He’d been tired, she saw it in his eyes and heard it in his voice—the energy he’d expended caring for her was extensive so it hadn’t taken him long to succumb to the call of rest once he’d assured her well-being.

But she still didn’t remember the past week or more and amid heat she’d been unable to explore him the way she could now—the way she is sure he did her own body judging from the love bites he’d littered her with.

Sitting upright beside him, her knees tucked beneath her chin, she lazily traces the curves of his muscles, committing them to memory. His body was truly beautiful—soft where it should be, strong and well-proportioned. He was broad in the shoulder, his chest tapering beneath his last rib to his hips. His hips gave way to thick, trunk-like thighs. And between them, soft and shapely was the standard *equipment* common for his designation and gender. Though she couldn’t believe it was *standard*.

That couldn’t have been inside of her—and it couldn’t get any *bigger*. It was already similar in size to some of her heat toys.

A large hand closes over hers, startling her from her staring. She blushes and locks eyes with her wizard. “Is everything alright, Hermione?”

Shivering, she nods, trying to ignore the warmth in her belly. Her heat was over, she shouldn’t ask more of him. After all, he was already staying with her.

But she just can’t help herself, “Can I touch you?”



“Touch me?” Draco’s heart lurches.

“I’ve never…” her words trail off as she looks at him again, all of him. Her gaze dashes to his. Understanding, he nods, letting go of her hand a bit too eagerly.

Granger—Hermione—wanders her touch from his sternum, tracing a path down his stomach, brushing through the pale hairs below his navel, then lower to his cock, brushing him lightly from base to tip with her fingers.

Merlin.

His cock leaps in response, and she sucks in a surprised breath.

He assumed from what she’d said that it was her first time properly seeing one, and her first time touching a man. Not exactly sure what to do, she continues her light examination, coaxing a groan from him as she rubs her thumb across his glans. She makes her inexperience explicitly clear when she asks, meeting his gaze, “What should I do?”

Draco fists the sheets, his voice thick, “Grip at the base and pump your hand up and down the length.”

Doing as told, she grabs his partial hardness in one hand and strokes him. His hips buck, blood rushing south to bring him fully erect. His witch’s eyes grow wide. A wash of pride fills him, but is quickly overcome by the bliss of her continued touch.

Watching Hermione learn is erotic. Seeing as well as feeling the moment she finds a rhythm, as she begins to roll her wrist at the top of the stroke, brushing his glans, fueling the burn low in his belly.

Done by her hand. By her choice—*fuck*.

“May I?” he groans, closing a hand on her wrist. Nodding, she allows him to pull her off and bring her to his mouth. Holding her brown gaze, he licks her palm wetly and returns it to his cock. “Helps with friction.”

Her head bobs in acknowledgment as she starts again, this time with more certainty. And *Merlin*, she watches him with such focus and rapture. It’s incredibly endearing, and the naivety behind her actions has him surging toward his finish—he was her first.

His stomach roils in pleasure, muscles tensing as she works him up. Pre-come beads off the tip of his cock, joining the slide of his spit on her small, soft hand.

“Just like that, love, *bloody hell*.” He attempts to stay still, not to thrust, to let her have her way with him, and not push her—it’s near impossible.

“Are you going to come?” she murmurs sweetly, curiously.

Grunting, he nods, gritting his teeth as his balls pull tight and his knot begins to pop. She sucks in a breath, feeling him thicken against the heel of her hand as it slides up and down and up and—

“Hermione,” Draco gasps, ropes of come shooting out of his cock, splattering his navel and draping across his witch’s knuckles.

Panting from the orgasm—flush with pleasure—he watches as she lifts her hand, inspecting the milky, white fluid. Her tongue darts out, collecting some from her fingers, and his eyes roll back, another spurt forcing its way out of him. She hums thoughtfully, then rubs her hand in the nest.

Once able to breathe again, he follows her lead, taking a blanket and wiping his abdomen.

Hermione returns her touch to his thigh suddenly, tracing lines on his skin.

“Did you really put this inside of me?” She probes his knot with the same curiosity as his cock, suddenly caressing and squeezing him, delivering an additional jolt of hot pleasure. “How could it fit?”

He blinks hard, forcing his mouth to work with his brain. “Your body is made to... accommodate me like this.”

She nods, “Do you force it in?”

“No—when it's time, I push deep, and it swells inside of you.”

“How long does it last?” Her nail scrapes down the vein, nearly making him choke on his breath.

“About a—a quarter of an hour. Longer in rut.”

His answer hangs between them for a moment before her voice comes in a whisper, anxious-sounding. “Does it feel good?”

Reaching to cradle her downturned face, he confesses, “Hermione, you feel like heaven.”

... ..

Leaning into the wizard’s touch, Hermione notices something, her heart dropping to her stomach.

“Draco, what—what are these?” She takes his arm in both hands, turning it to get a better look at the red wounds on his pale skin. It takes her only a handful of seconds to realize. “Why did you—it's because I told you not to... oh, god.”

A sob jumps from her as she stares at him in horror, pulling away. He’d hurt himself— *bit* himself to keep from biting her glands, because she’d asked him not to mate her.

Draco sits up, reaching to bring her back to him, but leaving her the option, hand hovering. “It's okay.”

She shakes her head. “Nothing about that is okay. You’ve mutilated yourself just to keep from—”

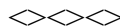
“No, hey,” he stops her gently. “These aren’t your fault, love. When I was rutting, this stopped the urges, that’s all. That’s why.”

Hermione can’t think past her panic, but she feels the space between them is doing more harm than good to her frayed emotions. She grabs his proffered—uninjured—arm, allowing him to pull her back into him. Once curled against his bare chest and able to breathe again, she speaks directly into his ear, “They’ll scar—you need dittany.”

“I don’t mind,” is all he replies, wrapping her up, his stubbled cheek against her temple. “They’re proof I didn’t hurt you. I need that.”

“You didn’t,” she confirms for him and realizes she needs to hear it as well. She hadn’t processed it yet—Yes, that she felt well, safe, and cared for. But she hadn’t defined for herself that feeling that way meant she wasn’t hurt. That *Draco hadn’t hurt her*.

“You didn’t hurt me.”



Hermione waits in the center of the bed, wrapped in a soft blanket, as Draco quickly visits the loo and retrieves supplies for her *aftercare*. She’d never anticipated this portion of her heat to be handled by the wizard. Usually, it was Dally who aided her through this most raw and vulnerable time—often a physical recovery as well as emotional. Then, once the elf confirmed she was firmly out of heat, Harry and Theodore would join in her tending to.

But Draco seemed more than willing, and she didn’t have it in herself to release him from the responsibility—she was afraid to let him leave, afraid to broach the subject, afraid for her heat to be over, and desperate to remain close to him. So many problems and threats waited for them outside, and instinct drove her to prolong the safety of his company.

A sudden pop startles her from overthinking, and she can hear shuffling in the bedroom beyond the heavy curtains.

“Dally?” Hermione croaks, her projected voice strained from disuse.

“Missy?” The sweet elf squeals, the curtains at the foot of the bed part just a little bit as she pokes her little face up, only her eyes and floppy ears visible.

“Oh my Missy!” the elf cries. “Missy is alright!”

Hermione smiles tiredly, “Thank you for taking care of us.”

“Dally is most welcome. Most welcome.” Her ears twitch as she smiles, eyes watery and squinting.

“Dally?” Draco calls quietly.

“Oh, Mister, Dally is so happy. You takes such good cares of my Missy.” Dally disappears, pattering toward the loo. Draco lets out a surprised sound. Hermione crawls stiffly to the end of the bed to peek out.

Blushing furiously, the wizard hesitantly pats the little elf hugging one of his legs despite his nudity. Hermione can't help the breathy laugh that escapes her at his discomfort. It draws grey eyes to hers and her wizard grins, flashing his straight teeth.

A feeling of failure floods her, sour and heavy.

"Come back?" she asks, her belly filling with insecurity, instincts driving her to retreat.

He nods as the elf releases him and comes to the foot of the bed, sweeping his fingers across her face and brushing her knotted curls back. "What can I get you first? Food? Potions?"

"Nothing," she shakes her head, catching his elbow, intending to drag him inside after her—she wanted the weight of him overtop of her. She needed the reassurance, the safety.

"Will you have some water for me?" he pleads gently, his thumb sweeping across her brow, smoothing away a furrow.

Worrying her lip, her eyes dart from him to the table in the corner. "I don't want to come out."

"I'll bring it to you," he shakes his head. So, she nods, agreeing.

Soon they're both back in the nest, cradled by the dark safety of the enclosed bed. She drinks slowly, wincing at the clogged feeling of her throat. After only a few sips, she gives up and returns the bottle to Draco. He caps it dutifully and smiles, "Thank you."

"Would you..." Hermione looks away, embarrassed.

"It's okay to ask, love," he assures her, his hand sliding around her ankle, providing comfort.

"Will you lie with me?" she whispers, not meeting his eyes.

"Of course," he agrees, shuffling from sitting onto his side, opening an arm to her in invitation. Wasting no time, she worms her way against him, immediately put at ease by his warmth and proximity.

Friday, April 30, 2004

Tucked between Draco and the bed again, Hermione basks in the weight and warmth of him, cozy under the additional blankets he'd retrieved to cover her as her internal temperature dropped lower, the shock and general weakness that characterized post-heat taking over. Both of them are resting their eyes, but neither is asleep. Her lips drag across his chest as she speaks, confessing, "I don't remember them."

Draco holds her closer, guessing. "Your heats?"

Nodding, she chokes on a sob, "I want to remember this one."

Petting down her matted hair, he presses a soft kiss to her forehead.

“I...” her tears are quick to fall.

Draco swipes at her tears with his thumbs, his expression gentle—everything about him gentle. She grabs hold of his wrists, crying openly over the suffering she had gone through in the past.

She had been so foolish, so stubborn and hard-headed, and it would have meant her downfall. He hums quietly, thumbs periodically dragging through her tears as she lets go long, wailing breaths.

A headache is forming behind her eyes, but there is nothing she can do to stop. This had been a long time coming. Years in the making. Years of hiding, of heat alone, of choosing to suffer, and the loss of her memory over the possibility of an alpha taking advantage. Now she couldn't tell if it had been worth it.

What Hermione did know is this time was different, worth remembering. “I want to—I want to remember *you*.”

“I'm right here,” Draco kisses her brow before resting his forehead on hers, shutting his silver eyes. “If you want the memories, you can have mine. They're yours—it's all yours. Whatever you want, love. Anything, I'll give you anything.”

“I'm sorry,” she sobs, “I'm sorry.”

He gathers her closer still, shushing her, holding her tenderly. She feels precious. She feels safe.

Shaking, she begs, “Please don't leave me.”

The alpha tenses, eyes reopening as he pins her in his stare and tells her fiercely, “Not on my life.”

<.:>.:>.:>

Wrapping the fresh sheet around their bodies, Draco holds his sleeping witch securely and drags the covers back overtop of them. He noses into her throat and shuts his eyes, basking in her. Hermione hums gently in her sleep, wiggling to unite more of their bare skin—hers feeling unnaturally cool.

Though exhausted himself, an amalgamation of relief, stress, and deep affection kept his mind busy. He sought to relish in Hermione's safekeeping, in her consent to have him care for her. She seemed to be in anything but a hurry to cast him away—if it was for her comfort or out of desire, he didn't much care as long as he was permitted to stay by her side. But even with the consolation of his continued welcome, he could not remain wholly positive. The peace of heat's end brought with it time to consider the external forces waiting for them.

An uncertain future awaited them beyond the wards and protections of their allotted time. There was only one sure way to avoid additional consequences and protect Hermione, but it

was off the table per her decision. He had, of course, anticipated the conflict the witch would experience this heat, but felt for her as she processed the years of trauma she'd developed living as she did, hiding her designation. It would be no quick process to navigate the complex fallout of her actions, no matter how well-intended they were when taken.

For her to remain conflicted about mating now was difficult because of his feelings toward her, but understandable when all aspects of her experience were taken into account. What the minister had arranged in the courtrooms had terrified *him*, and the treatment others of his designation showed toward Hermione when she was trapped for their benefit had nearly made him sick. It was no wonder she feared alphas. The behavior displayed was enough to make him resent his kind.

Their protests would do little to spare her from what lies ahead, though. The scene at the ministry was only a taste of what she would be subjected to should she fail to choose a mate. And she would not be the only one impacted. Potter and Nott were implicated now as well.

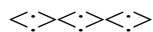
When they emerged unmated, he was sure all hell would break loose.

In no way did Draco want to cut their time together short, but he was anxious to begin problem-solving and ensure her continued safety for when they had no other choice but to emerge from their safe haven. Potter and Nott would have undoubtedly begun if they were free to do so, but even that was uncertain. A week had passed in the world, a week spent in bliss on their part, but a week of scheming for all others.

Breathing deeply from her receding gland, he lets her untainted scent course through him, warming him inside out. He had not expected the comfort he received from simply holding Hermione in his arms when they had entered this arrangement. But now he was remiss to admit he would ache for the sensation of her, the weight and proportion of her in his arms, as long as he lived.

In truth, now that he'd seen her through her heat, he felt complete for the first time since before the war, and if he never experienced this again, he would count it as his life fulfilled. She was the first and last witch he would ever see through heat, would ever rut with, would ever love mind, body, and magic.

This time together had been *everything*, and a part of him died knowing she did not share the sentiment. That she couldn't even remember what would be the most important thing he'd ever done in his life.



Despite the vastly different state she'd woken up in this heat, Hermione was still exhausted and weak. It was difficult even to keep her eyes open as they lay together in the nest. And as much as she wanted to savor this time, knowing it was fleeting, she was beginning to grow uncomfortable and overstimulated by the collection of textures and the remnants of their repeated coupling that Draco had not already wiped away.

It felt like time to leave the nest.

“Draco?” she murmurs into his chest, sucking in a deep breath of their collective scent. He hums, pressing a kiss to her forehead. “Help me to the bath?”

For a moment, she thinks he hasn’t heard her, but then he uncovers himself, tucking the blankets back around her.

“I’ll run it,” he tells her quietly, departing.

Hermione can hear him puttering around the loo and the water after a minute.

When he doesn’t return immediately, she decides she is well enough to get to the next room on her own and creeps down the nest, tentatively sliding her legs off the side of the bed. More sturdy than she can remember being after any heat, she lets her feet down and shifts her weight.

Holding the tall mattress, she manages a step. It was more than she’d been able to do after heat in years. She knows she can take another if she goes slowly. With a fortifying breath, she moves her clumsy feet forward, ignoring the trembling of her muscles.

Another step, another—then her knees crumple from beneath her, landing her on the floor.

Draco is suddenly by her side, “Love, are you hurt?”

Holding her breath against the dull ache of the impact, she shakes her head and wraps her arm behind his neck per his direction as he lifts her into his arms. “I thought I could do it.”

"You did." He secures her against his chest, their foreheads tipped together, “But I’ve got you now. So there’s no need to show off.”

She grins, smacking his chest lightly.

They enter the bathroom to find Dally pouring milky solutions and powders into the bath water, nearly halfway up the tub walls. Her little ears perk, “All readies for my Missy.”

"Thank you, Dally," Draco says.

The elf beams, nodding. "Dally will be goings."

Draco shuffles further into the room, making to set Hermione into the bathwater. Suddenly panicking, Hermione clings to him.

“No, no!” She pulls herself higher on his body, arching away from the water, instinct taking over. “No—please.”

Their scent—it would be washed away, it would all be undone. He was erasing himself from her. He was going to leave her.

“Hey, hey.” He immediately stops, standing with her again as she trembles in his arms, “Hermione? Look at me—tell me what’s wrong, and we’ll fix it.”

Staring into his grey eyes, she takes a deep breath, attempting to rein in her feelings.

What was wrong?

She wanted to be clean. She wanted the sweat and come and the slick washed off. She wanted her hair untangled so that when she turned her head parts wouldn't pull.

But she wanted to keep the scent of their combined pheromones. He was like a storm brewing in a meadow. Wood and citrus and lavender and the underlying musk that characterized an alpha. She couldn't lose that. She couldn't lose *him*.

"What's wrong?" he asks patiently.

"Will you scent me after?" she pleads, searching his face for any sign of rejection.

"Of course."

... ..

He smiles affectionately, still surprised by her want for him now. "If that's what you want, love, I would be happy to scent you."

"Okay," Hermione seems to steel herself, loosening her grip on him. "Okay."

He can still hear her hesitation.

"Would you like me to join you?" he offers.

"Were you not going to?" Her eyes flash back to his, her brows drawn together, conveying uncertainty.

Smiling, he tells her, "Only if you want me to."

"I want you to."

"Then I will," he assures her, adjusting to place her into the tub. "Ready?"

Hermione helps to lower herself into the water, then scoots forward, leaving space for him to climb in behind her. Carefully, he steps into the warm bath and sits, pulling his witch back between his legs. She settles her back to his front and draws his arms around her, melting into him.

"Draco?" she breathes. He hums in acknowledgment, dragging his fingers fondly across her soft stomach. "Thank you."

He presses a kiss to her temple.

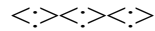
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Draco works a comb gently through a section of his witch's curls, detangling the mats as best he can as Dally sits on the loo, watching over them. She had seemed to warm to him enough

to give over a few of her tasks since Hermione's good health had been confirmed—this being one. He takes care to check in with Hermione every few passes of the comb, ensuring he isn't harming her, then continues his endeavors.

Best he can tell from her soft breathing, she's fast asleep in his arms, completely trusting of his care.

It takes a long time, but he manages to get even the worst of the matting combed through with very little damage to her curls. When he's finished, he sets the comb aside and wraps himself back around her, laying his cheek against her temple, content to stay like this for as long as she'll allow.



Eating bites of bread with butter, Hermione looks at Draco shyly. They'd relocated to her bedroom, both somewhat dressed now—her in a jumper and him in joggers—still damp from their bath. He watches her eat with such interest, letting her pick at what she wants without touching the food himself, though she is sure he is hungry.

“Have some,” she insists, not wanting him to miss out. Dally had prepared several foods, including berries, bread, and what was either pudding or yogurt.

“Once you're finished,” he declines, reaching out to tuck one of her damp curls behind her ear. “You look better, you have color in your cheeks again.”

Stubborn as ever, she holds the next chunk of bread up to the alpha's lips, waiting for him to take it. He does, much to her pleasure, and she flushes as he sucks the crumbs from her thumb.

Clearing her throat, she nods, “I'm not sure it makes any sense but I feel... awake now. There are always lingering symptoms from my heat—normally they last much longer than even this, days longer. Having you help me, Draco, really has made a difference.”

“I'm glad,” he says, catching her hand as she feeds him another piece, kissing her palm and then the pulse in her wrist.

Smiling to herself, she tries to ignore the reservations she feels in her chest. This is good, she feels good. She wants to keep feeling like this as long as she can.

Her expression must betray her.

“Should I not be so affectionate?” the wizard asks quietly, his attention solely hers as he rubs his thumb against her palm where his kiss was.

Hermione shakes her head, “No, I like it...”

“But?”

He reads her too well now, she thinks.

“I need some time,” she confesses, the conflict within her jerking her gut this way and that. So much had happened, so much still had to happen. She was safe now, but only as long as they remained in their little bubble. And it was nearly time to pop it. “Time to process and think.”

“About me?” he prods, voice tight.

“About all of this,” Hermione whispers. “This heat and mating and... my future alpha.”

“I see,” Draco replies hoarsely, the easiness between them disappearing between breaths.

She shifts anxiously, realizing she’s upset him with her honesty. “Draco...”

“It’s okay, Hermione,” he tells her, sitting up from her many pillows.

Panic grips her as he shuffles, looking to her as if he plans to leave the bed. She pushes up from her knees, forcing him back down in protest with small hands against his broad chest. Her mind clouds, “*Alpha—*”

“Hey, no.” His eyes widen, and he covers her hands with his, holding them in place. She whines needly as he draws her toward him and easily shifts the platter out of the way, making room to pull her toward the headboard beside him. “Hermione, it’s okay. You’re okay. I’m not upset.”

She tucks into his side, desperate to get as close as possible as she lets out a dry sob.

“I’m not upset with you,” he murmurs again beside her ear, rubbing her shoulder. “You’re free to explore your options, to think about who you want to spend your future with. Of course, you are. You needn’t worry about me. If you’ll have me, I would happily be your mate. But it is your choice, even now.”

His words are soft but come out choked. She shakes her head. That wasn’t what she meant.

“Okay, talk to me. I don’t understand,” he tells her patiently, continuing to comfort her.

Breathing in the smell of him, she stifles her tears and locks their gazes, hesitant hands drifting over his scarred chest, “I think that I want *you*. I just... This should be something we choose. I don’t want my designation or my heat to control my life, and I can’t tell the difference between instinct and want right now.”

His big hand cradles her face, and he nods, agreeing, “Okay.”

“It’s just—” She pulls back, catching his hand in her own and distracting herself with his fingers, “We barely know each other, but I want to know you. I don’t want to skip that. I need to know what you spend your Sundays doing and how you take your tea. I need more than an alpha—I need a wizard.”

“Okay, love. I can do that, we can.”

“Really?” She can’t stop herself from asking. Surprised by his continued willingness to accommodate her.

“Hermione,” he smiles, and it’s heart-stopping. “You are worth the wait.”

She smiles as well, but feels something dislodge in her chest because of his tenderness toward her. She thinks about his behavior toward her since his employment in their department. Always respectful, attentive, and kind. She feels suddenly guilty for her reservations, undeserving of his patience. She wasn’t a good omega. She had broken herself by holding out so long. She wasn’t ready for everything she was now expected to do, even if she was beginning to want it—*him*.

“I’m—I’m sorry I’m not ready to belong to anyone yet...” she apologizes, guilty. So guilty.

“You should never belong to someone,” Draco contradicts her, swiping at a straggler tear on her cheek, easing the ache. “Hermione, you should be cherished.”

“Would you?” she asks bravely, still so full of regret for her past choices. “Would you cherish me?”

“Every moment of my life.”

Saturday May 1, 2004

Cradling her forehead, Hermione fights a wave of nausea as she sits on the loo, feeling her bloods drip from her. The first day of menses following heat was always the worst. The cramps and general wooziness could oftentimes be overlooked because of her other common recovery symptoms and disassociation, but this heat her symptoms were so mild and she was quite in her right mind that only general exhaustion and the pains from her courses ailed her.

Daddy, as attentive as ever, prepared a hot water bottle which waited for her back in bed alongside her wizard. So, finishing up, she pulls her bottoms up and ensures her menstrual wear is properly situated before flushing and washing her hands.

She returns to the bedroom and crawls into bed beside Draco, tucking herself into his side. He presses a kiss to the crown of her head and reopens the novel he is reading aloud as she arranges the hot water bottle overtop her navel, sandwiching it in place between their bodies.

“Ready, love?” Draco asks, petting her curls down. When she doesn’t answer, he looks down at her, “Hermione?”

“Maybe I was wrong before,” she confesses, emotion clogging her throat. They could only distract themselves for so long. She was properly beyond heat now.

Discarding the novel and wrapping her in his arms, Draco assures her, “You don’t need to think of anything outside of this room right now. We have time, you’re still recuperating.”

Hermione rests her chin against his chest to meet his gaze, “Would you kiss me if I asked?”

“Are you asking?” He retorts, a smile tugging at his lips.

Searching his patient expression, she nods, “Kiss me?”

Draco moves, sliding down the bed to align their faces, his thumb caressing her cheekbone. His mouth slots against hers, warm and soft. She curls herself against him, hands creeping and fingers dragging in his white hair, holding him there.

The kiss is salty and slow, natural and familiar, even though she doesn’t remember if they’d kissed before. He nibbles at her bottom lip, coaxing her mouth open to deepen his exploration as he adjusts their bodies and helps her to straddle him.

Their tongues clash as she leans over him, one of his hands at her waist, guiding the slow grinding of their hips together. She feels his cock hardening between her legs and pulls away, breathing heavily as she plants her hands on his stomach. He’s so beautiful, panting beneath her, lips pink and swollen, white hair a mess from sleep and her ministrations. She traces his jaw, swiping his wet bottom lip as she reaches it. He kisses her fingertip, smiling.

“I think you should mark me,” she murmurs without thinking.

He goes stiff beneath her and catches her hand in his, breaking her fixation.

“Hermione,” he says warningly, but she sees his pupils dilating. “Please don’t test my restraint further.”

Grimacing, she shakes her head, trying to clear the desire from her system. “I’m sorry, I—”

He sighs, his palm gliding up her bare thigh. “You’re afraid of what’s waiting for us.”

Hermione worries her lip, nodding, “As soon as we leave, something else will happen, and we might never get another chance. Maybe getting it over with is better even if—”

“It isn’t what you want. I won’t let you force yourself, and I won’t do that to you.” Draco frowns, appearing conflicted. “As soon as you are ready to mate, you will have my mark. But only then.”

Her chin trembles, “It shouldn’t be this complicated, should it? I’ve made a mess of all of this.”

“No, love. This isn’t your doing.”

“My choices led us here.” She bites back, fear and reservation and anxiety twisting her heart. “We have no way of knowing what’s waiting for us, and we’ve already been proven foolish to think we could handle every way my hiding could go wrong. And now I can’t hide. The whole wizarding world will know by now that I’m an omega. Harry and Theo are facing legal repercussions—”

“Love—

“We’ll mate eventually,” she whines, feeling petulant and desperate.

"You might change your mind." His hands squeeze like he's afraid she will now. "As much as I want you, I'm aware of our history. There is much we should talk about before going through with mating. You want to know me. We can't achieve that in a day, and I won't hide the remaining dark parts of me to manipulate your decision. You might decide there's too much between us to reconcile."

"What's the worst thing you've done?" she asks, curious what misdeed he believes befouls him enough to lose her favor after everything that's occurred between them.

His eyes shut, and he takes a slow breath, holding her hands in place on his chest. His heart thuds beneath her palms. "I feel guilty for many things, but worst of all, the mistreatment of muggles and the prisoners held at my family's estate during the war. I tortured people. Classmates, innocents. I stood by and watched atrocities occur in the place I grew up. I watched you nearly die on the very floor where I took my first steps."

"You saved me," she reminds him.

"I could have done much more, could have chosen the right side of the war—saved Dumbledore that night in the astronomy tower. I let the Death Eaters into the castle, I made possible his death."

"Dumbledore was already dying of a curse," she shakes her head, sliding one of her hands to his face, tracing his brow bone. "He knew you were tasked with killing him that year. He let it happen."

His pale brows furrow, eyes welling with tears as he looks up at her. "He knew?"

Fighting her own tears, Hermione nods, "He orchestrated so many things behind everyone's backs. Even Harry's death. There was no avoiding any of it."

He swallows several times, processing the information.

"You lost your family, didn't you?" Draco finally asks in a quiet voice.

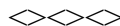
She didn't expect the question, but it isn't something she hides from.

"I chose to protect them," she says solemnly. "I erased their memories of the wizarding world, of me, and I sent them away."

He holds her hand more tightly. "I'm sorry you were forced to make that decision."

"I'm sorry you were forced to hurt people to protect your family." She wipes at his tears. "It wasn't fair."

Tugging her down against his chest, he wraps her in his arms.



Hermione is curled in Draco's lap, picking at the remnants of their lunch platter when the floo chimes, alerting them to an arrival.

They'd reopened the floo connection before sitting down to their meal, knowing they could not hide forever and that it would only be those she trusted visiting them here. Both of them agreed it would be best to address whatever awaited them sooner rather than later so they could begin preparing their own strategy to get out of this, but her wizard still tenses, curling the arm around her middle possessively tighter.

Maybe it was too soon.

Harry hurries into the flat, worried eyes finding them together in her armchair as Theodore arrives behind him. Relief floods her best friend's expression, and she smiles, untucking herself from Draco's lap to stand and greet her boys.

Arms come around her, Harry shaking as he holds her, mumbling, "You're alright. Merlin, you're alright."

Sensing his distress, she prolongs their hug, burrowing into him lovingly. He always worried about her heats, always returned in some anxious state until he was assured of her well-being. But she'd never seen Harry so out of sorts. She feels awful that they hadn't sent word earlier.

It's when he begins to cry that she can't stop herself from responding, dissolving into tears as well, clutching him just as fiercely as he sobs and squeezes her close.

"M'fine," she promises, muffled by his shoulder and her tears. He pulls away, wiping at his face with the sleeve of his shirt as he takes inventory of her, hands returning to brace her shoulders. His chin trembles, and he doesn't seem able to speak.

"Harry," she cradles his face, smiling tearily, "I'm well. Draco took good care of me."

He nods, taking a shuddering breath before pulling her back in for another hug. Several minutes pass of Harry holding her and collecting himself, until finally, he sucks in a quick breath and retreats, nodding.

She uses her jumper sleeve to dry his face for him, and he smiles, choking out a laugh, "Thanks, love."

"Where's mine?" Theo grins at her from over Harry's shoulder. He quickly scoops her into a hug of his own, holding just as tight as Harry—conveying his similar worries—but returns her to her feet after only a minute. "You look good, love. Healthy."

"I feel good," Hermione tells them, holding herself around the middle, feeling suddenly uncomfortable. It wasn't that she was embarrassed by their knowing she'd just experienced a partnered heat for the first time, or that it had gone well. It was... how vulnerable she felt popping the bubble and letting the outside in.

Anxiously, she steps back to Draco, who is politely observing the reunion. She wasn't sure what she wanted to happen now. Blindly, she reaches for him.

Theodore notices her retreat and hooks a hand around Harry's hip, drawing him back a step, giving her room. "You two need more time."

Draco loops an arm around her waist similarly, containing her anxious energy as he responds, "It will be a slow adjustment, I think."

Hermione nods, pressing back into the wizard, "But we should start. We need to know what's happening out there."

Harry nods, green eyes glassy, "If you're ready, there's a lot to talk about."

Chapter End Notes

hope you enjoyed!

Im not convinced this flows so there may be edits and additions

Chapter 13: Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Summary

Hermione and Draco emerge from their isolation and planning begins

Chapter Notes

So many things have delayed this chapter, travel and illness among them, but I won't get into it, because I am so beyond excited to share!

Happy reading!

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Sunday May 2, 2004

Jumping right into things proved to be the incorrect course of action for a handful of reasons.

Namely because, despite being physically out of heat, generally well, and in recovery, Hermione remained emotionally unreliable and ruled by instinct, which in this case had driven three alphas to rush to care for her upon breaking down at the news Rita Skeeter had written about her designation in the Daily Prophet. Then it was the attention of three concerned alphas all hovering that pushed her to spiral and dive toward subspace, which led to Draco getting physically between her and her best friends.

After coaxing them to step away and sequestering her somewhere safe—her bedroom—he spent the better part of an hour easing her out of the fugue state she'd slipped toward.

Once back to reason and soothed, Draco made the executive decision to postpone their efforts and excused Harry and Theodore from her flat, crawling into bed to hold her.

Following their one additional day of prolonging the inevitable, Hermione and Draco emerged—hesitant still—from their isolation, flooing to Grimmauld together following several assurances it was safe and strongly warded from the outside world.

Hermione stood anxiously behind Draco—who had dressed in a pair of denim trousers from the bottom of his trunk and a jumper from Hermione's closet, so she could commandeer his—her hands clasped around one of his much larger ones as they are greeted by her friends in the floo parlor. She smiles at them both, letting out a tight breath.

“You’re first to arrive, Wilf and Rik’s portkey isn’t for another ten minutes,” Harry says after greeting them, scrubbing at his messy black hair. “We can stay in the parlor like usual or go somewhere else in the house if you’d like. How are you feeling this morning, love?”

Hermione nods, squeezing Draco’s hand. “I am... well. I’ll try my best not to be overwhelmed like yesterday...”

“We will go at your pace,” Theodore assures her, clasping a hand on his mate’s shoulder.

“Could we sit?” she asks, knowing she’ll tire herself out to stand and talk all day.

“Of course,” Theo nods, shuffling to make room for them to come further inside.

Draco guides her to the sofa, inspecting the room as she sinks with relief into the cushions and tucks her legs up under herself, ensuring the skirt of her dress covers her. He asks, “Your floo network is shut?”

“Yes,” Harry confirms, “The only open connection is to the flat. We can put the grate down if it would make you both feel better.”

Inspecting her alpha, Hermione nods at her best friend. Harry does so, the heavy metal clunking into place with a pull of a lever concealed behind one of many framed photographs. Tension seeps out of Draco, and she tugs at him, pulling him down onto the sofa beside her.

“Have you both eaten?” Theodore asks.

“Daddy took good care of us,” Draco nods, settling into the corner of the sofa, his arm crossing Hermione’s lap to secure her beside him.

A warm flush radiates from her—half arousal over the possessive action, half shyness to be handled so gently. She sneaks a peek at Draco beneath her lashes to find him already watching her, and reddens further, prompting a grin from the wizard. Elbowing him weakly, she ducks her chin, happy and embarrassed.

A high-pitched whine pipes up from deeper in the house, and Theodore perks, “That’ll be the kettle. I’ll just be a minute.”

Harry watches his mate leave, then looks at both of them, green eyes surveying. There’s a warmth to his assessment, and he offers her a smile when they lock gazes, “You look—merlin, Hermione, you look so—”

“I feel it too,” she offers, heart-stricken to know she’d put so many of the people she cares about through years of worry and stress over her situation. Worse, now they were in danger for helping her.

Harry comes over and kneels before her, setting his hands on her knees, “I can see you using that big brain of yours against yourself. I’ll tell you as many times as you need to hear it—none of this is your fault, Hermione. Any guilt you are feeling is misplaced.”

“Harry,” she tries to keep from completely breaking down.

He smiles at her tenderly, “Second only to my bondmate, you are what is most important to me in the world, Hermione. I won’t apologize or regret for a single moment the choices that have brought us here. The situation may be more complicated, but we are all together in this. We are going to get through it like we always do.”

Hermione nods, swiping at a few stray tears and reaching out to clasp her hand atop his. “Thank you.”

“Hey, now,” Theodore frowns as he returns with a tea service, setting it on the low table between the sofa and chairs. “What’s gone wrong in the last three minutes for there to be tears?”

Shaking her head, Hermione denies anything being wrong and dries her face. Harry stands, and Draco tightens his hold on her thigh, thumb swiping back and forth comfortingly.

“Are you warm enough, love?” Theodore asks as he pours several cups of tea. “Malfoy, milk, sugar?”

“I take milk,” Draco bobs his head in thanks.

“A blanket would be most welcome,” Hermione says, still feeling chilled in spite of her layers. Harry retrieves a heavy knit throw they’d received from Molly several winters past—it smells thoroughly of him and Theo, like home. She tucks it atop her lap and snuggles into Draco’s side, her instincts telling her to get as small and close as possible. Theodore comes round with a cuppa for them both, and Hermione reluctantly frees her hands, accepting the tea setting.

With a deep, calming breath to ease her urges, she goes to take a sip of the tea and winces as the liquid burns the inside of her mouth.

“Here, love,” Draco halts her, brushing his thumb over her lips, the curl of his index finger firm beneath her chin. A tingle of magic invades her mouth, and the numb remnants of the hot tea on her tongue fade. “Better?”

Hermione nods, stunned at the speed at which he’d noticed she’d hurt herself *and* performed a *wandless* healing charm. Arousal seeps into her blood, heady and eager as her heart pumps, brown eyes locked on her wizard. “Draco...”

“Yes, love?” he checks on her once more, grey meeting brown. His eyes darken when he notices. Her name escapes with his next exhale, “*Hermione*.”

A small, needy sound leaves her, and he sucks in a breath, pupils enveloping his iris. They stare at each other for several long moments before Draco clears his throat and forces himself to look away—at her friends, then quickly at his tea. “Might I ask where your bathroom is?”

“I’ll show you,” she offers hastily and without consideration, discarding her tea as she untucks from the sofa. But no one in the parlor protests.

Leading Draco hand in hand, Hermione's heart beats rapidly against her ribs, warmth stirring in her belly. Once stolen away deep in the house, she stops, almost causing the tall wizard to run into her. He catches himself just short, his chest brushing against her shoulder blade.

"Hermione?" he asks softly, thumb swiping over her knuckles.

Without debating her actions longer than it takes to trigger her muscles, she turns and presses up on her toes, looping a hand behind his neck, meeting their gazes, and kissing him gently. Draco sucks in a sharp breath, white eyelashes fluttering shut as he eagerly takes control of the kiss.

Backing her up against the nearest wall, his big hands span her waist, securing her close. His lips mesh rhythmically against her own, drawing soft sounds up her throat. Her hands explore his chest and throat, nails scratching against the slight stubble grown in since his last shave a few days prior.

She could kiss Draco forever. It was a lovely, decadent feeling she'd hardly explored as a teen. Now, as an adult witch, with a most attentive and skilled partner... it was bliss. Hormones and magic working in harmony to fill her head with warm and fuzzy sensations—

Someone comes into the dim hallway, interrupting them, "Whoa, whoa. Hands to ourselves."

Draco breaks their kiss in no hurry, turning to glance at her best friend, arching one of his white brows. She can't help but inspect her alpha, fingers tracing his face—the bridge of his nose—drawing grey eyes back to her.

"Come on, mate," Harry approaches, hands up. "Take some space."

"*I kissed him*, Harry," Hermione says under her breath, eyes remaining on the wizard pinning her to the wall, lacking any desire to be separated from him.

Draco gently catches the fingers exploring the dip of his chin by the back of her wrist, careful of her sensitive scent gland as he brings her pulse to his lips, pressing a light kiss there. Hermione's belly coils with want, and she droops into the wall.

"Alright, love," Harry's voice softens, obviously seeing their actions are consensual. "But both your pheromones are getting thick. How 'bout I show Malfoy to the loo and you go back to the parlor? Would that be alright? Rik and Wilf will be here any minute."

Hermione doesn't know, her mind preoccupied, and whines noncommittally.

"*It's okay*," Draco rumbles, giving her a smile. "Go back to the parlor, love. We'll be along shortly."

Nodding her ascent, she presses harder into the wall and removes her touch from the wizard, watching as he and Harry pass her toward the loo. Once out of sight, she braces herself with a hand on the wall and begins wandering back to the parlor.

Losing the proximity of her alpha—of anyone—is strange and uncomfortable. All of a sudden, she feels cold and is anxious to be on her own, even in a place so familiar. The total

absence—a pit of emptiness in her chest—is disorienting and foreign.

As she enters the parlor, three pairs of eyes fall upon her like spotlights, and she shrinks under the attention, bumping against the doorframe in her haste.

“Love, is all well?” Theodore asks, getting to his feet.

“Yes,” she confirms, fortifying herself with a breath. When it doesn’t help, she shakes herself to clear the pheromone fog in her mind and feelings preoccupying her, responding once more. “Yes.”

Wilf stands in greeting as she refocuses. With the fresh gulp of air, relief floods her, and she rushes quickly to her omega friend, holding her wrists protectively to her chest as she leans into him in greeting, allowing him to wrap her in his arms. He nudges her cheek with his own, taking just as much comfort in the proximity as she does. A wash of calm overcomes her, helping to further clear the fog in her mind and recenter her in the moment.

“Thank you for coming,” she sighs, pulling away—not too far. Looking past her fellow omega, she smiles at Adalrik where he remains seated to appear non-threatening—a tactic he always adopted post-heat. Wilf sweeps an arm toward the sofa, and they move to sit down. She curls her legs up under her bottom as they get comfortable and share her recently abandoned blanket between them.

“Having known you these years, Mäuschen, I think you are okay with my saying you look very well for first time following heat,” Rik addresses her.

Looking down, she nods, flexing her fingers in her lap. “I knew there would be a difference, but this is...I haven’t the words.”

Wilf nods, understanding, clasping his small hand in hers, “The first time my brother aids me I grieve for days. The relief he provides to me is unequal.”

Rik tucks his chin, adding softly, “We are glad you are safe, Mäuschen.”

... ..

Gripping the sink basin, Draco stares at his dripping face in the mirror, familiar grey eyes piercing straight through him. He’s close to hyperventilating, close to losing control even now. His alpha instincts scream for him to take his witch back to safety. To ensure she is cared for and protected. To hide her from the world waiting for them beyond this moment of isolation they’ve managed to haphazardly manufacture in the thick of everything.

They’d hardly been at Grimmauld five minutes, yet Draco knew Potter withheld bad news from them. He could read it on the wizard’s face beyond the stoic mask he was putting on for their witch, his best friend—*Draco’s* omega.

Someone would try to take Hermione from him—again. And they would continue to do so until the fight was won, until she wore the mark of an alpha.

Postponing said marking had been the correct course of action, however.

He knew it—as a wizard and a man.

As an alpha? He was mad for agreeing, for allowing the danger his witch faced to persist.

By making this *right* choice, Draco might have just given Hermione away for the second time in his life. His ideal match. The witch he'd fancied since childhood. His every dream, hope, and fantasy.

And she'd kissed him, wanted him, touched him, looked at him with those eyes so full of warmth and kindness. Like she was in wonder of him. Like he wasn't the foul, ugly thing he'd convinced himself he'd become from the war and Azkaban and isolation.

His knuckles are white where he clutches the porcelain of the sink, and he looks away from his reflection, huffing out a great sigh—he knows that he cannot hole up and wish the situation away. No—Draco needed to show up for his witch, remain steadfast with her, working with her, defending her, loving her...if she lets him.

There is something hard in his gaze as he meets his reflection's eyes again, determined. Draco dips his hands into the running water and splashes his face once more, hoping the cold will temper his inner turmoil—and the lingering arousal of Hermione's kiss.

Merlin—that kiss.

He splashes himself again.

When he emerges from the toilet—collected—Potter is waiting for him just outside.

The other wizard doesn't speak a word before suddenly grabbing him in a tight hug, shoulders trembling as Draco fumblingly holds him back. The dark-haired man snuffles hard, patting his shoulders, releasing him, and looking away as he attempts to regain composure.

"Potter..."

"What you've done for her—" Harry clears his throat, voice heavy with emotion. "I know how you feel. I know how difficult it must have been for you to, to obey her wishes. That you were able to resist mating... You've solidified yourself as trustworthy, and I can plainly see Hermione feels that way as well. The level of comfort she has with you, and receives from you is—thank you. For saving her and taking care of her in the ways Theo and I were not able to. We will never be capable of expressing just how grateful we, we—thank you, Draco."

He stammers, "You needn't—"

"Hermione is alive because of you." Harry shakes his head, hands clenched in fists, green eyes boring into his. "She is alive."

Pride, fear, anticipation, love, worry, anger—all of it rushes through him. "It was a privilege."

Potter nods, chin trembling. "You're a good man."

“I’m not—but I am trying to be.” Draco swallows thickly, his emotions flooding from behind his occlumency walls. He grasps at anything else—a topic influencing most of his worries at present, “There are things you aren’t telling us...aren’t there? Something has happened.”

“Soon,” Potter looks back down the hall, like he is checking if anyone is listening.

He clasps a hand on Potter’s bicep, lowering his voice. “We need to keep Hermione safe. At any cost.”

Harry’s eyes harden meeting his, and he nods, “We will—whatever it takes.”

... ..

Draco’s eyes lock on her the moment he enters, and she can’t help but stare back, studying him now that they’ve taken even a few minutes of separation. She wants him to come over, to be close again.

Lips parting to say something—Theodore interrupts. “Ah, Malfoy, this is Adalrik and Wilfrid, our friends from Germany. They’ve been helping us for the past several years to keep Hermione safe. They also developed your daily blocker potion.”

Regretfully, Draco pulls his attention away from her. “Good to meet you.”

Rik eyes the other alpha, sizing him up as he finally stands. “You are the Death Eater?”

“Former,” Hermione corrects with a scowl from the sofa.

Rik chuckles and nods, “Apologies, Mäuschen, I am not intending offense.”

They shake hands and Hermione sits back into the cushions—satisfied with the correction—returning her attention to Draco. He’s watching her again, a shy smile on his face.

“I am Wilf,” the other omega greets from beside her.

As soon as he speaks up she prickles and wants to show him somehow that Draco is *her* alpha. Before she can act, Wilf continues saying, “Excuse my brother, he is like cactus—a prick,” and Hermione is reminded as the others chuckle that the brothers are long-matched and uninterested in pairing off.

Draco cracks a grin, sparing the omega a moment’s attention before returning her heady gaze. “Hermione, where would you like me?”

His warmth and attention further soothe her sudden jealousy.

“You sit there,” Wilf breaks their stare and gestures to the place beside Rik, the furthest seat from her. “You do not mate—I am guessing for a reason? It is good to take space now. Clear your heads.”

Knowing Wilf means well does little to quell her disappointment as Draco nods, agreeing.

“Tell us why you do not mate? How is it possible?” Rik asks once the other alphas have seated themselves in the available furniture, Theodore now beside her on the sofa and Harry in the remaining armchair.

“I asked him not to,” she confesses, glancing at her alpha. His opposite hand is clamped over his scarred forearm concealed by her jumper. A reminder of the lengths he had gone. Guilt eats at her. “I was afraid and wanted more time.”

“You are very strong-willed to resist Mäuschen,” Rik tells Draco.

Draco nods, eyes burning through her, “I’m relieved that I could.”

“And we are grateful for it,” Theodore adds.

Hermione shifts uncomfortably, mixed feelings rising up over her impulsive request so many days ago, and her alpha’s continued obedience to her wishes. She was a very different woman then. So much has happened since.

“So,” Wilf says, clasping his hands. All eyes fall upon him. “My brother and I discuss the heat. As unfortunate as time and place, it may have saved you.”

“Saved her?” Harry prompts.

Rik clears his throat, taking up the burden of explaining, “When Wilf presented, he tries to take on his heat alone, even managing with the toys for a while like Mäuschen. But it is not long before he feels his health decline and behaviors change. So I start seeing him through his heat, and everything levels out again. There is some history of this in journals we find. That alphas balance omega health—those who delay mating. When the omega prolongs isolation and suffers heat unaided, soon the designation magic becomes volatile. It reacts with the created environment and attacks the host—the omega. If Mäuschen had made it to next heat, she will not have survived. The unattended magic is killing her.”

Silence accompanies his revelation. Hermione squirms.

She had imagined that potential outcome before this heat. Toyed with it in her mind, felt it in her failing health and tired body. To have it all but confirmed made her feel incredibly lucky and incredibly stupid. She’s nearly killed herself through her own stubbornness.

Stupid. Stupid. Stupid.

“Now—” She flinches. “It is our belief that if you want to keep a regular heat, er... schedule in the future, you need to be seen through by alpha moving forward. Your omega magic is what forces you out, it is what fails the suppressants. There is no alternative explanation for the treatments to have failed so catastrophically. Even if you miss dose, or change regimens, there is tolerance in your system. Your pheromones should remain dull, and there would be no heat-induced. It is why now, following heat, your true scent is not yet revealed—the potions did not fail you. Your magic overcame them to save you.”

“So this truly was a breakthrough heat?” Harry muses.

“Er, yes. Mäuschen has all known signs of breakthrough. A heat between cycles, accelerated progression—she would not have survived unattended even if her magic was stable.”

Dread has her sinking deeper into the sofa—she had brought it on herself by prolonging mating. That is what Rik is saying. She had driven her magic and body to desperate measures. She had forced a heat through her refusal to acknowledge the necessity of an alpha until there was no alternative choice.

Feeling eyes upon her, she glances up to meet Draco’s reassuring look. He regards her tenderly, with concern and warmth. No pity, no anger, no judgment.

Once more overcome by feelings of remorse and guilt, she looks down at her lap, picking at the blanket and fighting tears.

Draco asks the quiet room in a soft voice, “Hermione was a month early this heat, will that affect her from now on?”

Rik clears his throat, a sharp sound compared to their collective muteness, “We cannot know. Mäuschen may return to her predetermined biological schedule now that she is seen by an alpha. Or the next may be in a new cycle of ninety. We can only wait.”

Hermione perks up anxiously at the prospect, “I might go into heat again in a month’s time?”

As good as this experience was, a month felt like very little time to prepare, to bolster herself against the mental and physical toll, to decide if Draco was to be her alpha permanently...

The idea appealed now, but she may become disillusioned given more space—exactly why they agreed to wait. But ready or not, she wasn’t deluded enough to believe she would get away without mating a second time. When her next heat came, she would be mated.

“It is a possibility,” Wilf confirms solemnly beside her.

Hermione’s eyes clamp shut, her mind chasing a false sense of security in temporary darkness.

This was all too much. If only she still possessed a time turner and could leave herself a note not to attend work that morning. If only she was still a secret. If only—

“Do you like this alpha, Mäuschen?” Rik prods. Hermione jerks to look at the German wizard, a blush bleeding into her cheeks as she registers the question. “You have choice now—you best make it before someone is trying to take it away again.”

Instead of a response, a fearful whine escapes her.

The other three alphas jump to her defense, Harry and Draco making low sounds of discontent as Theodore bites, “Hermione is aware of this, Adalrik. We needn’t continue to bring it up—that is not what today is for.”

“I do not say this to be unfair, or cruel,” the alpha sits back. “I try to be realistic. She is better to pick someone she has comfort with, rather than risking an alpha taking her forcibly. If

Mäuschen trusts this wizard I suggest choosing him.”

Rik points at Draco, whose expression is gloomy.

“He isn’t her only option,” Theodore says, trying to be helpful.

“He shows restraint not mating her in the ten days they spend wrapped in the pheromones. A mark of strength and respect of Mäuschen—and she cannot help but look at him all this time. The wanting is on her pretty face. This is good reason to pick him, no?”

“We have decided to wait,” Draco states with finality, his attention hers and Hermione’s stomach turns.

It is true that she wanted time. Now she had it and it *saddened* her.

Instinct told her that Draco was the best she would find, that he was a good match for her and would exceed her wants—not only as an alpha but also as a wizard. He’d shown a side to himself in the days since her heat she had only ever caught glimpses of. Gentleness and tenderness and emotional integrity. However, lingering emotions kept her apprehensive and fearful of committing to a future untested beyond alpha and omega compatibility.

The frantic submission and agitation passing into this recent heat and the exposure and conflict she faced when at her most vulnerable left her feeling insecure and unsafe even now. Despite feeling clearheaded, the paranoia that her omega magic was pushing her toward the conclusion of ‘*Pick Draco*’ niggled, and she remained unconvinced that mating blindly was the solution to all her problems. This coupled with her regret for her past actions and a desire she hasn’t yet come to terms with...

She’d done so much to avoid mating without properly taking the time to understand *what* and *who* she was depriving herself of. An alpha partner was more than essential to her. It wasn’t a completion, but a complement. A comfort, a security, a feeling of belonging.

Reluctant as she was to admit being wrong, heat accompanied by Draco had opened her eyes. But, be it a month or two before her next heat, Hermione needed the time to learn the wizard she would be mated to.

Rik’s brows rise. “Mäuschen?”

Hermione realizes she has been asked something, eyes refocusing on the visiting alpha.

Rik prompts, “The risk of waiting is worth it to you?”

“*Bruder*,” Wilf says warningly, a hand gripped tightly in Hermione’s.

“I...” Hermione looks between all of them, feeling glassy-eyed. Draco’s jaw ticks, his eyes betraying his calm exterior. This conversation is difficult for him too.

Draco wants her—Hermione knows he does. It’s why he saw her through heat. Why he attends her so patiently, building his rapport and her trust. Why he has offered to mate her only when she is ready.

The risk of waiting...

She'd waited so long already—years of hiding, of relying on Harry and Theodore. Of making a go of it on her own. It was unfair of her, wasn't it? Maybe—

“Hermione, take a breath,” Harry instructs, spotting her internal battle like he always does.

Her shoulders heave up and down, the oxygen silencing the intrusive tangent her thoughts were trailing down. Still, there is a tremor in her shoulders now—a wavering in her gut.

She knew the risk of waiting but *was it worth it?*

“Hermione deserves the chance to get to know the wizard she bonds herself too. That is why we are waiting,” Draco pins her in his heated gaze. *“We can give her the time to make an informed decision. She should have a choice.”*

The relief that comes from hearing him say it is palpable in her exhale— *yes, that is why they are waiting.*

So she can choose.

They discussed it at length, but to have him defend her needs is validating and—arousing.

Draco clears his throat, voice losing its edge. *“And... Nott is correct—I am not Hermione's only option.”*

“You do not want her?” Rik raises a brow, testing Draco.

Draco's knuckles pale, shoulders going rigid, *“I want Hermione more than anything, but I will not take away her choice.”*

Theodore, meaning well, jumps in again, *“Prior to this heat, we made a list of alpha candidates—”*

“I don't want someone else,” Hermione shakes her head, curls dancing across her shoulders.

Draco's gaze is soft on her, but his smile is forced, *“You should meet with one or two others... in the event you decide I am not your alpha.”*

“But—”

“Hermione, love. He's right,” Harry butts in.

“No,” Hermione protests. She—she knows she has to decide before her next heat, even if the rest of them haven't verbally acknowledged that fact yet themselves. *“I...”*

For some reason, it only occurs to her now that postponing mating to explore her options means she actually needs to ‘explore her options’. Not just Draco. Because if she does learn something irreconcilable between herself and the wizard, she would otherwise be left without

an alpha for her next heat. Which would lead to her death if Rik and Wilf were to be believed. But meeting with another alpha—

Hermione's heart drops to her stomach, "It isn't safe."

"We can supervise the visits. They can happen here," Theodore assures her, his hand settling on her knee.

"That's—we can not plan for everything. I know that now, and it is not a lesson I intend on reliving. I just want—I want the time to fully come to terms with mating and then during my next heat we can..."

Hermione gulps, glancing at Draco, then shutting her eyes. She wants...she isn't sure what she wants.

The conversation had gone in a direction she was uninterested in exploring in this setting. This was too personal—despite her audience being those closest to her, who care for her when most physically vulnerable—and the decision would ultimately be hers alone, not voted upon like a Wizengamot session.

Meeting with other, strange alphas—no. Out of the question. Her fear of them has not lessened in the time since her forced-outing. Draco would be... if she could just get to know *him*.

"Who is on this list?" Wilf asks of Harry and Theodore. "People you trust?"

"No, no—enough!" Hermione snaps, pulse thumping in her throat, making her acutely aware of her still-sensitive mating glands, which only heightens her irritation. "I'm done discussing this. I won't be trapped in a room with other alphas. I won't do it again."

All of those eyes on her, the weight of the charms, her inability to escape somewhere safe—*exposure*. She frees herself of the blanket and stands from the sofa, breaths short as she paces toward the floo, wanting to go somewhere safe.

The smells, the eyes, being chased—all awful, all too fresh.

Hermione had thought it was over. That she'd made her choice. But with her hasty request not to be mated and Draco's strong will—she'd done this to herself.

Now she feared for the future more than any other moment in her life. More than during the war. Her torture. The days following the worst of her heats.

It made her nauseous to think about it. Her lack of control. The powerlessness. The Ministry and its leaders. Everyone who knows now. All of the alphas.

She'd lost anonymity. She'd lost privacy. She'd lost—

A hand closes around her elbow, and Hermione whips around, tugging away until she locks eyes with Harry and begs him, "Please don't make me?"

“We won’t love.” He shakes his head. “If Draco is your choice, he is a good one. We can make time for you to become comfortable.”

Searching his eyes, she can tell he isn’t trying to deceive her.

“I’m afraid,” she whimpers as Harry guides her into a careful hug, a tear dripping down her cheek.

“It’s alright, you’re safe here.” He pets her curls down, pressing his cheek to her temple. His arm around her back holds her firmly to his chest, burying her in his comforting scent.

“Hermione,” Theodore says gently, still seated on the sofa, “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have pushed. Come sit, and we will talk about something else.”

When she doesn’t protest the suggestion, Harry takes action and guides her to his armchair, knowing she needs a bit more space. Hermione’s mind struggles to form some alternative thought that isn’t as daunting as mating as she settles into the cushion and somehow comes up with, “Does Ronald know?”

Out of the corner of her eye, she catches Theodore grimacing. Harry clears his throat, “He was at the ministry—he knows.”

“He’s angry with me then,” she doesn’t have to guess. “How did the rest of the Weasleys take it?”

“Turns out everyone but Ron and Molly knew,” Theodore scratches at the back of his head, looking a bit put out.

“They all knew?” Hermione’s face pales as the news sinks in. “Even Charlie?”

Harry nods, bringing over her blanket, “He called to check on you after the news got out. Says it’s why he came late for Christmas hols this year. He noticed it was hard for you with so many unmated alphas around. Wanted you to be able to celebrate more comfortably.”

Hermione doesn’t know whether to be extremely thankful to the older wizard or embarrassed by the measures he took as Harry dotingly tucks her in.

“What do I say to them now? How do I explain why I kept my designation secret?” she asks. The Weasleys, despite some chafing from time to time, were all the family she had. Ron and Molly at least must be taking great offense to her secrecy all these years. Not to mention Hermione’s choosing an alpha other than one of the Weasley boys.

“Nothing to worry about now, love. There are more important things,” Theodore says softly, attempting to be reassuring and failing as he shares a look with Harry, who sinks into the space she vacated on the sofa.

“You have news,” she gathers, even in her frazzled state. Draco clears his throat, leaning forward from his seat to fix a fresh cuppa, leaving her wondering if Harry had already mentioned something to him when they were alone.

Her tone turns frosty. “More from Rita?”

The looks on both Harry and Theodore’s faces betray them, her best friend clearly struggling for words.

“The Ministry then,” she murmurs, unsure she wants to hear of it now.

Draco rescues her from deciding as he stands and comes to her, tea in hand in offering. He sinks to kneeling before her once she accepts the setting, clearly having had enough of their separation. The proximity alone relieves the squirming sensation plaguing her, a modicum of security returning as he reaches out and cradles her cheek in a warm palm.

“You’ve gone pale,” he comments, speaking only to her. “Do you need a proper break?”

Balancing her teacup on her thigh, she reaches up with her free hand and covers his, shutting her eyes and taking a slow breath. “Maybe that would be best. I’m not sure I’m ready to hear what Kingsley has to say.”

“Let us recess then. I could use the toilet,” Wilf declares, standing and exiting the parlor swiftly while glowering back at his brother. Rik sighs and follows.

“We’ll go put another kettle on,” Theodore says, pulling Harry up with him. “Take as long as you need, love. No rush.”

Then she is alone in the parlor with Draco.

... ..

It takes exactly two heartbeats for his witch to begin crying and another three to relieve her of her tea and pull her into his arms to comfort. She molds herself against him, her face hidden in his throat as she sobs quietly, trembling in his hands. Something in his chest breaks, and he kisses her hair, holding her as tenderly and securely as he is capable. “It’s alright, love, everything will be alright.”

“I’m sorry,” she gasps, tears trickling down his neck.

“You have nothing to be sorry for,” he pets down her curls, feeling close to tears himself.

Hermione only tucks more tightly against him, grip on him tightening. He adjusts so he sits firmly on his bottom and not his knees, creating a nook between himself and the armchair for her to settle into—a small, defined space like he has learned she likes.

Slowly, she begins to calm down, her breathing evening out, a small hitch here or there. Her tears all but stop. When she emerges from his chest, her cheeks are stained red and streaked with a salty residue.

Draco wipes it away with his thumbs, leaning forward to press a gentle kiss in its wake, and her pretty brown eyes flutter shut. His palm moves to cradle her throat, her pulse slowing as he traces her jaw with more whispers of kisses. “You’re safe with me—safe here. I promise.”

She nods, leaning her face closer to his, “I know... I’m just afraid of what is waiting out there.”

So am I, he thinks, taking a deep breath and resting his forehead against hers. “Whatever is waiting, we will face it together. I’m not going anywhere until you tell me to, and even then, if you need me, I’ll be there.”

Hermione nods slightly again, her nose tracing his. Brown eyes open and meet his, and she leans in enough to brush a soft kiss against his lips. His eyes close, and he returns the gentle pressure, drawing the kiss out a little longer.

She whispers against his mouth, “You know that I want you, don’t you? That I just need time.”

It’s his turn to nod, but he can hardly believe it. He never expected her to want him back, it felt like a dream. Hermione was no liar though—secretive, yes, but she always said exactly what she meant.

He presses forward for another soft kiss, murmuring, “I will give you anything you need.”

... ..

Harry and Theodore return first with a fresh pot of tea—notably several minutes after the kettle whistled from the kitchen. Hermione is back in the armchair, Draco is fixing her a small plate of treats from the silver tray on the table.

Both of her friends seem to remain at a loss for words as they set eyes on her. Once seated, Harry’s lips part and press firmly shut twice.

“How bad is the news for you both to be acting such a way?” Hermione asks as a gauge. Harry winces as Theodore sets to make each of them a fresh cup of tea.

Draco trades her plate of sweets for her now finished cup, bringing it over to Theodore, who meets her eye with a weak look, “A response to the Ministry will be necessary and in short order, but it is less the detail of the news we have received than the implication of it. We need to discuss our plans to secure your well-being until your next heat now that you have chosen to delay mating.”

Wilf and Rik—who appears somewhat chastised—return, accepting tea from Theodore as they reclaim their seats. Rik pulls a flask from an inner pocket, splashing some of the amber contents into his cup—a potion, Hermione notes, not liquor.

Wilf continues the conversation, having caught some of it, “What has your Ministry communicated?”

Harry rubs his palms on his trousers and stands, walking to one of the shelves along the back wall decorated with books and trinkets. He selects a thick, cream envelope and returns to the sofa, fingering the thick parchment. The seal is already broken. “This arrived three days into

your heat, Hermione. From the ministry, addressed to you—I hope you don't mind that we opened it.”

“You know that I don't,” she tells him, leaning forward anxiously as he frees the letter from within, unfolding the crisp paper.

“It is quite wordy,” he warns, clearing his throat. “To Hermione Jean Granger, omega under the care of Lord Harry James Potter of House Potter. It is requested by the Minister for Magic, Kingsley Shacklebolt, head of the Ministry of Magic, on behalf of the British wizarding community, that upon emergence from heat, you are hereby compelled to report to the Department of Designations at the Ministry for due processing as an Omega citizen of the British wizarding population. Signed, Kingsley Shacklebolt, Minister for Magic.”

It wasn't what she expected, though, she felt no enthusiasm toward compliance.

“It's a trap,” Draco speaks first, bringing Hermione her tea. She sets it beside her plate on the end table with a quiet ‘thank you’.

“That is our feeling as well,” Theodore says, taking his and Harry's tea to the sofa and sitting.

“May I?” Draco paces to Harry, asking for the letter. The wizards exchange the parchment, and Draco begins to scrutinize it.

“I assume you have checked for spells?” Rik asks, sipping his potion-tea.

“As soon as it arrived.” Harry nods, accepting his cuppa from his mate. “We believe Kingsley intends to exploit Hermione again should she prove unmated—which she is.”

“If Hermione obeys, your Ministry will do everything in its power to keep her from returning here. She cannot go,” Wilf says.

“No, this is compulsory. If Hermione doesn't appear within the standard ten days of receiving the summons, it is grounds for seizure by the DMLE,” Harry shares, rubbing his eyes beneath his glasses. “We have three days to come up with a foolproof plan to protect her on her visit, or face the aurors.”

Hermione's stomach flips, and she worries her lip. Reacting similarly, the furrow deepens between Draco's brows. She reaches out to touch him, a palm dragging down his waist.

He looks at her, expression easing, “It's alright, love, three days is plenty of time to sort this.”

Nodding, she glances at the parchments now held at his side, “Was that really all it said?”

Draco nods, offering it to her. She accepts, fingers pinching the textured parchment and envelope together.

As his hand falls away, there is a brilliant flash of blue light. Hermione is hooked behind the navel and dragged away.

Chapter End Notes

Don't kill me <3

I would love to hear what you think though o.O

Also can yall think of any more tags I should put on this?

Chapter 14: Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Notes

Happy New Year! Thank's for your patience.

Content warning for the end.

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Sunday, May 2, 2004 cont...

An afterimage burns against Draco's eyelids. When he blinks, he can still see the shape of her sitting in the armchair. But when he looks again the seat is empty—not even the linen weave of the cushions maintains an imprint of the small witch, as if she'd not been there at all.

But Hermione *had* been there only moments ago . Curled up beneath a knit blanket, her expression calm yet concerned, curls arranged in a honeyed halo, and eyes, tinged red from her earlier tears, affixed upon the letter from the Ministry.

Now, an empty seat.

The room is loud. With voices. With movement. His pulse is in his ears, drumming above the eruption. It's like the flash of blue light stunned him. Draco can't seem to move away from the now-empty seat, hand still outstretched in offering of the letter—a portkey.

He swallows around the lump in his throat, the implications of what has just occurred already processed. Mind working ten steps past the realization that Hermione has been abducted from a place they assured her was safe, already on the many scenarios of what the Minister has planned for her.

He feels like vomiting.

“Malfoy!” Someone shakes him, brown eyes—the wrong brown—meeting his. *Theodore*.

Sounds sharpen—the muddlement fading away.

“—could this happen? You say it was not bewitched—”

“It wasn't! We checked it a half dozen times!”

“It must have been time activ—”

“We have to go to the ministry,” Draco interrupts, his voice betraying more than a hint of desperation. The fear he feels burns up his throat like bile, threatening to choke him as he

looks around at the other wizards. Hot licks of magic at his fingertips warn that he is reacting to the absence of his witch, that any number of things would push him over the edge into accidental outbursts. His voice is gravel, “We have to get her back— *now*.”

“Come on!” Wilf yells, making for the locked floo.

“Wilfy, you must stay.” Adalrik grabs his brother back as Potter and Nott jump to action, the former disappearing from the parlor.

“*Bruder*, no—” The German omega rebuts, the arguing voices lowering as they switch languages.

“Malfoy, you have your wand?” Theodore breaks his attention, going to the well-stocked liquor cabinet at the side of the room and dropping to a knee.

“Yes,” Draco confirms, patting his thigh while watching the alpha rummage around. Before he can snap that *this* is no time for liquid courage, the man retrieves an ornate box from behind several bottles.

He picks three everyday artifacts out, pocketing one—a clothespin—and returning to Draco’s side with the others, explaining briefly, “They are portkeys—in case we need a way out.”

“Right,” Draco takes the spoon, the metal biting into his fist as he shoves it into his empty pocket.

They tune back into the German omega’s loud protests as Potter returns with his crimson Auror robes and a fluid-like, silky, silvery material. Wilf finally abandons the argument and pulls away from his alpha brother’s hold of him. The wizard quickly flees the room, reeking of sour upset—regrettably, they couldn’t spare the time to comfort him.

“We need to get going,” Draco redirects their attention, his focus singular. The other three alphas shake themselves, clearing the effects of Wilfred’s pheromones.

Harry tosses the strange garment to his mate, “Just in case.”

“What is it?” Adalrik questions.

“An invisibility cloak,” Theodore shares as he spells his pocket and feeds the material into the extended storage of it.

Potter dons his heavy robes, working to fasten them as he says, “It’s Remembrance Day, so only floos on the ministry closed-network will be open. All non-essential operations have the day off and the public will be in attendance for the speeches in memoriam. Traffic getting in is going to be hell.”

“Fuck,” Draco rakes back his fringe, the thump of his heartbeat starting to pound inside of his head. He’d forgotten the date.

Glancing at the clock over the mantle, he sees it is half eleven—nearly time for the Minister’s speech. Despite the horror he feels knowing Hermione is somewhere else, alone—exposed,

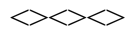
yet again, and possibly subjected to any number of nefarious plots—he can only hope the day’s events preoccupy those making countermoves against them long enough to get her safely back home.

Harry pulls his wand from his trousers, slipping it into the holster secured across his chest. “Draco, do you know the Piccadilly Circus entrance?”

“Yes,” he bobs his head.

“Take Theo, I’ll follow with Rik.” Nott gives over the last portkey—a misshapen saltshaker—as the plan is made. They all make for the front hall, their heavy shoes thudding rhythmically until the front door opens. Potter turns back, wand out. “If we’re separated, meet at the fountain.”

Glancing at Theodore, Draco proffers his elbow and brandishes his wand, “Hold tight.”



Pushing through the crowds mulling about the Hall of Arrivals in anticipation of the Minister’s noon address, Draco shoulders and ducks his way through witches and wizards alike—Theodore close behind him. The atmosphere of the Ministry is hot and loud with all the extra bodies cramming in for ‘the best’ view of the podium erected at the center of the Atrium. His anxieties continue to build in his chest, winding him tighter as his magic burns at his fingertips.

What if they planned to drag Hermione to the podium the moment the Minister’s address began?

What if Shackbolt planned to auction her off to the public? Make a spectacle of her.

What if the Minister pleaded ignorance of her location?

What if she wasn’t here? What if they never saw Hermione again?

If Kingsley arranged an alpha for her in the case she remained unmated... If the portkey took her straight to them—

Draco shoves harder, his anger and fear battling for the opportunity to suffocate him. The witches and wizards he pushes past respond with grunts of displeasure, but none stop him—none of them could if they tried.

Suddenly, a brass band of instruments sounds in the cavernous hall, and cheers rise to drown them out as the clock strikes exactly noon and the Minister takes to the podium, hands held wide in greeting of the masses. Hate burns deep in Draco’s gut as he stops to watch the haughty man grin and wave over the remaining sea of people between them.

A palm curls around his shoulder, and he whips around to find that it’s only Theodore, face set in a grim expression. He leans close to speak into his ear so Draco will hear over the noise, “We need to keep moving—get to the fountain.”

Draco nods and resumes their battle through jostling bodies.

The textures, scents, pheromones, warmth, voices—if Hermione is there, it'll be too much to handle.

Merlin, he hoped that she was tucked safely away somewhere. The courtrooms or an interrogation room. Somewhere quiet and isolated. Trapped and alone was better than trapped and surrounded—especially with the number of alphas he smelt in the crowd.

“Welcome!” Kingsley’s voice booms over the crowd, silencing them. “Welcome, and good morning, my fellow witches and wizards.”

Draco forces his way forward.

“Today, we gather to remember, to honor, and to reflect. Six years ago, on this very day, we saw the end of a great and terrible war—one that has left deep scars across our world, but one that has also proven the strength, resilience, and unity of our magical community. Today, we remember those who sacrificed so that we could live in freedom.”

They don't appear to be any nearer the fountain as they continue squeezing between bodies.

“The recent war was not the first time our world had been threatened. The First Wizarding War, nearly three decades ago, cast a long shadow and instilled great fear in us all. I remember it well—I remember the fear, the uncertainty, and the loss. Friends, mentors, brothers, and sisters in arms—so many brave souls gave their lives to resist a darkness that sought to tear our world apart. And yet, that victory, as hard-fought as it was, was incomplete. The darkness we thought defeated was merely waiting—gathering strength.”

Desperation claws its way up Draco’s throat. He held so much guilt for his past actions and his current failures—he was failing Hermione. Again.

“When Voldemort returned in 1995, we did not want to believe. We did not want to recognize our old enemy, whom so many hoped had died in 1981 when Harry Potter faced him in infancy. An enemy more dangerous and determined than ever before. But we overcame, we stood together to fight again.”

He’s dragging himself through the crowd by their robes, bodies packed together like sardines the closer he comes to the fountain. Each time his hands brush skin, a strong *zap* passes from him to the nameless, faceless wix. Bodies shuffle and jostle to get out of the way.

“Over three long years we experienced moments of triumph and times of great despair. Our victories came at a terrible cost—heroes lost, families broken, and futures stolen from the young people who fought on the front lines. So many of our heroes were children in our hour of need, yet they stood in defense of our world. They faced horrors no young person should ever have to see. And they gave their lives to ensure that others would not have to live under the shadow of fear. We owe them more than we can ever express.”

“Death Eater scum,” someone spits at him as he passes, a foot stuck out nearly causing Draco to trip.

“We remember those who perished—too many names to list, but none forgotten. Each life was a thread in the fabric of our resistance, woven together by courage, love, and the belief that good must prevail. Their sacrifice wasn’t just for themselves, their families, or their friends. It was for all of us—for every witch and wizard, alpha and beta, omega and magical creature, and the Muggles. It was for a world where hatred, tyranny, and fear would never have a place.”

The crowd is applauding now, making his forward progress all but halt.

“The Battle of Hogwarts, on this very day six years ago, marked the final victory over Voldemort and his forces. As we look around our world today, we see the marks of our heroes' sacrifices in the freedoms we enjoy, in the safety and security of our daily lives, and in the peace that now prevails. But let us not be complacent. The work of rebuilding is ongoing. The fight for justice, equality, and compassion continues, and we must honor the memory of those we lost by committing ourselves to that cause every single day.”

Draco can hardly breathe, worming his way through any space he can manage—catching elbows, stepping on toes...

“It’s been six years, and though the wounds have begun to heal, the process of recovery will take much longer. Families are still mourning. Communities are still mending. But we are here. We are alive. And we are free. I ask you all, on this day of remembrance, to think not just of the battles fought and the lives lost, but of the future we are building together. A future where the values we fought for—truth, love, equality—stand at the heart of our world. It is our responsibility to ensure that the next generation, the children of today, of tomorrow, grow up in a world where such horrors are a distant memory and where our heroes’ sacrifices were not in vain.”

The Minister’s words ring empty in Draco’s ears as he remembers the panic and fear on Hermione’s face when subjected to public display. The immoral criminal persecution she faces, that has led to her abduction. The wizard speaks of equality and freedom, yet ensures centuries-old prejudice toward omegas prevails. He preaches direct contradictions to his actions toward one of the most famous witches in the British wizarding world—one of the war heroes he idolizes to the public.

“We cannot forget. We must not forget. We owe it to those who fought, to those who fell, and to those still struggling to rebuild. Today, and every day, we remember.”

They’re so close to the podium now that Draco can see the sweat on the minister’s brow. He raises robed arms to the crowd like a great winged thing.

“Thank you, I wish you all a peaceful day of remembrance.”

The Atrium becomes suddenly deafening, nothing like the applause the Minister had garnered before his speech. Arms rise above heads, elbows knocking into temples, bodies a riot of movement. Draco spares the hardly visible podium another anxious glance as the crowd shuffles, dragging him laterally—away from their target. He can only make out crimson through the hatch of limbs.

“Hello, members of the wizarding public.” Camera flashes go off.

Potter stands before the masses, bedecked in his formal Auror robes and Muggle denim trousers. “My name is Harry Potter, and I thank you for the opportunity to speak today.”

What is he doing? The Minister is—

Draco looks all around for the Minister, spying him a handful of steps behind the podium, his expression a mix of false confidence and apprehensive tension. Clearly, he doesn’t want Potter to speak, but if he were to stop him, there would be a public revolt.

Oh.

Theodore grabs Draco by his jumper and pulls him back—away from the fountain and podium. Witches and wizards rush to fill the space they've evacuated, eager to be nearer to *The Boy Who Lived Twice*. It creates a domino effect and gives them an escape to the side of the room, where they can follow the border of the Atrium more easily than carving their way through the mob.

Potter continues, “Today is the anniversary of one of the most difficult days in many of our lives. The Battle of Hogwarts was a brutal, devastating resolution to a seemingly endless conflict. For myself and my friends, it marked the end of years spent thwarting dark forces, time on the run being hunted by Voldemort’s Death Eaters, and uncertainty if we would live to our next birthday. At Hogwarts, we won the war—but suffered great losses.”

Harry shoves his unruly black mop of hair off his forehead, giving everyone a glimpse of his famous scar before continuing, “Personally, I lost my mother and father, James and Lily Potter, my godfather Sirius Black, countless friends including Remus Lupin, Nymphadora Tonks, Fred Weasley, Cedric Diggory, Lavender Brown, Dobby the Elf, Colin Creevy, and allies like Alastor Moody, Severus Snape, and Albus Dumbledore.”

He clears his throat, gripping the podium. The Atrium is silent in anticipation of what else *the* Harry Potter has to say. He looks up, green eyes scanning the room, “I have never shared this publicly before, but erm—the Muggle relatives who raised me after my parents were murdered were abusive. I won’t get into the worst of it, but I will share that they concealed the fact that I was a wizard from me until I received my Hogwarts letter. Before that, I held the belief that I was wrong and unnatural. It’s what I’d been told...

“But then I learned I was a wizard. This world quickly became my home, and Hogwarts, my sanctuary. It was there that I made my first friends. Ronald Weasley, who rode the train to Hogwarts with me, and at the Sorting Ceremony, both he and Hermione Granger were placed in Gryffindor house alongside me. Ron was my first friend—welcoming and loyal. The best mate anyone could ask for. And Hermione... Hermione is one of the most generous witches you could ever hope to befriend. Wicked smart and caring—and bossy.” The crowd chuckles. “I wouldn’t have lived to this age without them, I wouldn’t have survived the war—hell, I wouldn’t have lived to twelve. I could spend the rest of the day recounting every time and each way my friends have saved my life and our world over the years...”

The Atrium holds its breath, “In our first year, they followed me into the bowels of the castle to stop a plot to steal the Philosopher’s Stone. If it weren’t for Hermione’s quick thinking and Ron’s bravery, none of us would have returned alive. In our second year, a Horcrux made by Voldemort while he was a student of Hogwarts was unleashed upon a first-year student. It unlocked a secret chamber beneath the school, put there by a founder, releasing a dangerous creature trapped inside.

“It was Hermione who figured out the creature was a Basilisk, risking herself in the process and becoming petrified. And it was Ron who accompanied me into the Chamber to face it down and ultimately defeat it. In my third year, Hermione defended me against Sirius Black before we knew he was innocent. Once we discovered he was wrongly imprisoned, she helped me rescue him from the Dementor's Kiss, facing down Aurors, the creatures of the Forbidden Forest, Dementors, and werewolves at full transformation in the process.

“In our fourth year, Ron warned me of the dragons I would face in the first challenge of the Tri-Wizard Tournament. And Hermione spent hours in the library researching and coaching me to survive. Both bravely submitted to being placed in the Black Lake as a champion’s lost treasure for the second task when asked by Dumbledore. Hermione even invented a spell for me to use to find my way through the hedge maze in the third challenge.

“When Dolores Umbridge invaded Hogwarts in our fifth year, Hermione encouraged us to assemble in secret to learn defensive magic. She made sure we were prepared when the danger arrived. On the night Voldemort lured me here under the belief he had captured my godfather, my friends followed me to the Ministry. We were fifteen and faced off against Death Eaters like Antonin Dolohov, Bellatrix Lestrange, and Voldemort himself. Sirius died that night and Hermione was nearly killed, but she didn’t hesitate for a second the next time I needed her.

“After our sixth year—a year I spent paranoid and constantly vigilant—Hermione committed to hunting down Voldemort’s other Horcruxes alongside me. When my seventeenth birthday came, Voldemort was ready. It was his last chance to get to me before the Trace wore off. The Order of the Phoenix made sure I survived to my birthday, but Hermione made sure Ron and I survived afterward.

“Our safe house was attacked the night I turned seventeen—a night we spent in celebration of Bill and Fleur Weasley’s wedding. We only had time to grab each other and apparate out. Ron and I had nothing with us but the clothes on our backs and our wands. But Hermione had packed everything and kept it on her for weeks. Clothing, food, shelter, money... we survived on her preparations well into winter.

“Hermione, Ron, and I spent nearly a year on the run hunting Horcruxes and methods of destroying them. We were cold, hungry, and completely isolated. At one point, Ron left us to check on his family. When we were on our own, it was Hermione who reminded me of why we were out there and why we kept going every single day. She kept me strong...

“A few weeks before the end of the war, we were captured by Snatchers. I’d accidentally spoken the Taboo on Voldemort’s name in a moment of frustration, and we were found in minutes. Hermione managed to shoot a spell off and conceal my identity when we were taken before high-ranking Death Eaters. And she endured nearly an hour of torture under the

Cruciatuſ Curse when questioned.” Draco flinches, the memory of that day replaying behind his eyelids. Theodore guides him the rest of the way to Rik, who is standing by the fountain, and they join the alpha to watch Potter’s speech. “If not for Hermione’s bravery that day, we’d have been killed...”

He doesn’t need to explain how that would have been bad for the rest of them, “At the final battle, when Voldemort promised an end if I turned myself over to him, Hermione tried to come with me, knowing it would mean her death as well. But she didn’t care what it meant because she didn’t want me to die alone...” Harry clears his throat, looking choked up. “Hermione has always been my fiercest ally and greatest friend.”

Everyone is silent, clinging to every word of Potter’s.

Draco is too—he hadn’t known half of it, even given the abridged version. Everything they’d been through together... It put their friendship, their closeness, into a new light—it was no wonder they were so devoted to each other. Harry and Hermione had spent nearly their entire lives in support of the other. They had been there for each other as long as they’d had magic—their identities were enmeshed. Beyond magic and blood, they were family.

The wizard commands every person in the room, leaving all of them wanting more. He quickly delivers, “Today I must ask all of you for your forgiveness... I cannot celebrate with you. Not knowing one of the people directly responsible for my being here today—one of my heroes—has been abducted and is now unjustly held by the Ministry.”

There is a chorus of surprise and shock through the Atrium. Draco glances at the Minister, watching as his face pinches in anger, then smooths again to face the public.

Harry continues, “As you all may know by now, Hermione Granger is an Omega witch. We have kept her designation private for many years as she waited to meet her right alpha. Very recently, her suppressants suffered a catastrophic failure while at the Ministry, and she was publicly outed. It was then that Hermione was threatened by our leaders and coerced into choosing an alpha while under duress.”

More gossip ripples through the crowd.

“In a deal made with the Minister himself, if Hermione agreed to choose an alpha from those present at the Ministry on that date, she would be forgiven her transgressions and set free to continue living as an omega citizen. Additionally, my bondmate, Theodore Nott-Potter, and I would be spared an Azkaban sentence for aiding and abetting her in the concealment of her designation. And though Hermione has complied by choosing an alpha and confining herself until her magic settled, the Minister has gone back on his word.”

The crowd livens, outrage spreading.

Harry raises his hands magnanimously, “I cannot share the reasons for choosing to conceal Hermione’s designation as they are personal and painful to speak of, but I must make it public knowledge that the Ministry is threatening omega citizens, coercing them into mating, and abducting them from their homes fresh out of heat despite compliance. Even an omega war heroine.”

The volume only grows and Harry drives his point home, turning to look at Minister Kingsley Shacklebolt, “I stand before you today to formally apologize for our deception. I cannot excuse the illegality of our actions, though they were made in the protection of someone I deeply love. But I must demand that the Ministry return Hermione Granger to her rightful place with her family. We seek a peaceful and swift resolution to this matter, but I must remind you that, by law, she is a member of my magical line. As Lord of House Potter and the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black, I invoke the authority vested in me by ancient magical custom and hold the Ministry accountable for its unjust actions. You have one hour to respond, after which my house will be compelled to escalate.”

The outcry in the Atrium as he finishes speaking is deafening. Calls for the Ministry to immediately release Granger. Shouts of indignation. The crowd surges forward, voices a furious roar that echoes as fists pump into the air, and shouts of “Free her!” fill the hall.

Draco watches Kingsley’s reaction as he takes in the angry mob and Potter standing above him on the platform, green eyes burning like acid through the elder wizard.

The Minister sets his jaw and nods.

... ..

All the air is knocked out of Hermione as she impacts hard ground, her temple ricocheting off cold stone tiles with an audible crack. Her eyes roll back, her ears ring, and her lungs buck against the trauma of abrupt, unanticipated portkey travel.

Despite the danger she anticipates she is in, Hermione isn’t able to process her surroundings, thoughts, or pain—too stunned by her landing and the struggle to regain her breath.

Finally, she wheezes in a hard lungful—the air rough down her windpipe. She coughs and gasps as she rolls onto her front. At least half a minute passes before she gets a decent breath, another minute until she is breathing regularly.

Pressing up onto her hands, she opens tear-filled eyes to find herself in a cell. Three stone walls and one of iron bars facing a dark hall. There is an uncomfortable-looking wire cot and a toilet barely concealed by a low wall within. Her shoulder pains as she eases herself off the ground, her arms threatening to buckle just as she manages to sit upright, and her legs are tangled in the knit blanket transported with her from Grimmauld Place. She weakly tugs at it as she finishes her observations.

Luckily, perhaps, she discovers she is alone.

Taking account of herself, Hermione thinks the impact to her shoulder was the worst of her injuries—though, she may also be concussed if the lingering tone in her ear and haze of her vision were anything to go by.

Trying to stand proves hasty as her stomach lurches and she is forced to empty her breakfast onto the floor beside the letter—*portkey*. Moving away from the puddle of her vomit, she plucks the letter back up and shuffles stiffly to the nearest wall. After wrapping herself in the

blanket in an attempt to stave off the oppressive cold in the cell, she struggles to read but can tell the text of the letter is unchanged.

Discarding the page to the ground, she checks for her wand, already knowing she does not have it—it hadn't been retrieved from the Ministry archives yet. With a sigh, Hermione gives the room another look from where she is collapsed against the wall.

Despite the room being a cell, she doesn't think that she's in Azkaban. This stone was smooth and marbled, clean. It was cold, but not from the presence of Dementors or the North Sea. In fact, it was relatively quiet here. She concludes that she must be at the Ministry in a holding cell.

Knowing this does little to quell her fears.

A wave of dizziness has her shutting her eyes against the room. In spite of her symptoms, she needs to be able to think. And perhaps thinking will aid in keeping her panic in check, contrary to her lesser instincts' designs still prominent from heat that are screaming for the protection of her alpha.

The violence in which she was deposited and the residual effects she is experiencing were not unusual for a portkey bewitched with a series of conditions needed to activate it. A tricky and expensive bit of magic. Legal, but underhanded—she wouldn't put it past the Ministry.

Because Harry and Theodore had checked for bewitchment, some sort of time activation was likely. It was passed around prior to her contact too, so it must have been keyed to her magical signature. And only hers, as it had waited to activate until after Draco had let go.

Hermione could only theorize, but if she had mated, it probably wouldn't have activated as her magical signature would have changed to be a combination of Draco's and hers...

Breathing manually to force herself to remain calm, Hermione tells herself there are some advantages to this method of entrapment. For one, Kingsley—she assumes—could not know exactly when she would trigger the portkey and thus, is not there to meet her. So, he loses some element of surprise.

Now she has time to compose herself and come up with a plan—any plan. But she hopes, with any bit of luck, she'll be found before one is needed.

... ..

They end up in the Minister's office, all crowded around the two chairs facing the desk, and none of them sitting. Kingsley faces them, gripping the back of his fine chair as if a crutch while he grinds his teeth.

Potter speaks first, "Where is Hermione? What have you done with her?"

The Minister's eyes glance between all of them and he huffs, rounding the chair to sit before telling them, "Perfectly safe, I can assure you. She is here in the Ministry."

Draco's heart drums violently against his ribs. *She is here, somewhere.*

“Why have you taken her?” Theodore demands.

Kingsley clears his throat, “Miss Granger has broken wizarding law—”

“But you made her a deal. She upheld her end, and now you’ve unlawfully detained her.”

“Hermione Granger is an omega witch who hid her designation—”

“Yes, and that is why the deal was struck! You told her on behalf of the Ministry that if she chose an alpha to see her through this heat, she would be left alone. That the Ministry would not interfere again, and she would be free to—”

“Now wait a moment, Mister Potter. I am sure that the Ministry gave no such assurances.”

“Bollocks!” Theodore surges forward a step—stopped only by Adalrik’s firm grip on his arm.

“Should I have you removed once more, Mister Nott?” Shacklebolt threatens.

Potter sidesteps in front of his mate protectively, his alpha magic clearly prodded by the suggestion. “Kingsley, tell us what you expect in return for Hermione.”

Kingsley steeples his fingers, leaning forward on the desk. “I will allow Omega Granger to go with you now, today. I’ll forgive the illegality of your actions and assure no further repercussions. I’ll even allow her to mate the alpha of her choosing—with certain stipulations.”

Draco’s knuckles go white against the chair he clings to in an attempt to hold himself back from the Minister—and Azkaban.

“Hermione has decided to be mated at her next heat already. There is no need to pressure her to do so any sooner. We can keep her from the public. No further disruption need occur.” Potter discloses in a tight voice.

The Minister grins, standing Draco’s hair on end. “I am very glad to hear that, Mister Potter, as it is the Ministry’s desire that the omega now wait to be mated.”

“Wait?” Theodore asks, sounding as confused as Draco feels. But the panic that squeezes his heart is his alone. *Why would they have her wait?*

“My aides have uncovered legal procedures for situations such as the one we find ourselves in. It is now the Ministry’s position that Granger must not mate until her next heat. To ensure this, she will wear a protective garment over her glands when away from the Ministry, and she will take ministry-mandated suppressants.”

Draco’s heart sinks. They’d sooner put Hermione in danger than look the other way. It was anticipated, yet he found himself disillusioned all the same.

“Additionally,” Kingsley leans back in the chair, folding his hands atop his rotund belly. “The omega will entertain several candidate alphas up until the moment her next heat sets in,

spending an equal amount of supervised time with each, daily, at the Ministry. We have agreed on four. Two of the alphas will be of the Ministry's choosing, and two will be yours as her legal guardian, Mister Potter. But they will exclude Draco Malfoy—"

"Draco is her preferred alpha," Potter interjects on Hermione's behalf—his too.

"And if he still is at the time of her heat, she may choose him. But, he has forfeited his precedence to be her alpha when he failed to mate her during the heat. He must now take a secondary role. And if she fails to mate an additional time, the omega will be relinquished to Ministry custody, or Theodore Nott will go to Azkaban for collusion."

"Not only is this the third time you've threatened my mate, Kingsley, but you've dictated once already the terms of Hermione's choosing an alpha, and she complied. All of this is wrong—the only reason you are minister today is because Hermione won us the war!"

"Your perspective is only one, Mister Potter. Now, I have provided you with the Ministry's terms. Comply, or Omega Granger remains detained within the Ministry for alternative, mandated coupling."

He's going to be sick.

Potter finds himself sinking into one of the chairs before the Minister, rubbing his eyes beneath his glasses. He lets out what Draco can only describe as a sigh of defeat. "I will agree on Hermione's behalf to wait for her next heat to mate, and to the preventative measures to ensure compliance. However, she will not be taking the Ministry-mandated suppressants, the supervised visits will occur every second day, and I will have veto power over the two alphas the Ministry chooses for her."

Shacklebolt considers and counters. "In return for these concessions, the Ministry would require an observed mating."

"Out of the question."

"This is a negotiation, Mister Potter. There is give, and there is take."

Potter grinds his teeth, "I will relinquish veto power."

"Are we agreed then?"

Theodore, seething, speaks up. "Are you forbidding Hermione from exploring alphas outside of the four selected candidates?"

"No, quite the contrary. The Ministry only wishes to make certain the omega is aware of who is available to her now that you have so graciously given her a say in the matter."

Draco is barely contained. Magic licks beneath his skin. It feels hot and angry. Every word from the Minister stokes it, urging him to lash out. Rik has abandoned Theodore in favor of his flank, hand hovering between them, ready to grab him back if the need arises. It may—Draco isn't sure he can contain himself for much longer.

Potter clears his throat, “I want this in writing. You’ve gone back on your word once already.”

“We could take an Unbreakable Vow—”

“No. This will be witnessed by the goblins. They will make certain there are no loopholes.”



They sit in a plain conference room, a decrepit goblin slowly inking the agreement onto parchment. Potter heads the negotiation once again, with Kingsley directly across from him. Seated next to Potter is Theodore, then Draco, and finally Adlarik. They’re all silent except for the scratch of the quill against the page.

It was smart of Potter to involve the goblins. As the bond that incorporated Hermione into the Potter bloodline was facilitated by them, they would not take kindly to the Ministry interfering in such a designate bit of magic. It was no simple thing to be on a goblin’s bad side either, and harder still to curry favor with them once it is lost. That was not a position the Ministry wanted to find itself in.

“And who are the candidates?” the goblin asks, voice rasping.

Kingsley jerks to attention, patting his robes and producing a small roll of parchment neatly tacked with blue wax. He breaks the seal, spreading it before himself. “I have prepared here a list of eligible wizards all ready to take on the responsibility of an omega. But I will allow Lord Potter to choose his candidates first.”

Draco’s stomach flips for what feels like the hundredth time. It’s miraculous he’s managed to hold onto its contents this long with the way the Minister spoke of Hermione.

Merlin, she must be so afraid wherever it is they are keeping her. It’s been two or more hours since her sudden disappearance from Grimmauld Place. He can’t imagine what must be going on in her head, the fear. It was still so soon after her heat. That morning, she’d been slow to rise and stiff once on her feet. Her bloods hadn’t finished, he knew she was in pain. And she was dressed for Grimmauld—which had been accommodated for her recovery.

His breathing is light, borderline hyperventilation as he imagines all the places they could be keeping her. A cell. A courtroom. An office. A conference room like this one. Maybe she was just down the hall—though he hadn’t been able to scent her.

Flexing his fingers, he can almost feel her absence.

He was meant to protect her.

Potter and Theodore are leaning together, speaking under their breaths as the goblin and Shacklebolt watch them. They seem to come to some agreement, Theodore sitting back, sparing him a pitiful glance.

“We choose Neville Longbottom and Charles Weasley.”

Two safe choices, Draco thinks. Both wizards were good men, to his knowledge and from past interactions with them. A lesser evil to choose them than from a random list as they were already considered by the pair for Hermione. And likely two alphas she would have been encouraged to explore even without Ministry interference.

Kingsley clears his throat and Draco braces himself for the worst, “Demetrius Haworth and Bernard Winikus.”

Haworth—there was a boy in school with that surname who was several years younger than them. But he couldn’t recall a first name. Surely Kingsley wouldn’t choose someone so young to ingratiate the Ministry to. The family had no great fortune, unlike Bernard Winikus, who is presumably from the family Winikus who distributes potions and ingredients across all of Europe.

He cannot claim to know much about them—he soon would.

Potter’s fist clenches where it rests on the table, but none on their side say anything.

The goblin continues to scratch the agreement into physicality. Nearly a quarter hour later he sets down the quill and plucks up the papers, reading aloud in his gravelly voice.

CONTRACT OF AGREEMENT BETWEEN THE MINISTRY OF MAGIC AND THE NOBLE HOUSE OF POTTER

Preamble:

This binding agreement is entered into on this the 2nd of May, 2004, by and between the Ministry of Magic (hereinafter referred to as "The Ministry") and Lord Potter (hereinafter referred to as "The Lord") for the custody and regulation of the Omega, Hermione Jean Potter née Granger, until such time as mating has been concluded in accordance with the stipulations set forth herein.

Stipulations:

1. Refrainment from Mating:

The Omega shall refrain from mating until the onset of her next heat, at which time she will have the sole discretion to select her Alpha and mate with said individual immediately.

2. Protective Garments:

To ensure the safety of the Omega, she shall wear protective garments whenever outside of Ministry supervision until the onset of her next heat.

3. Supervised Visitations:

The Omega shall appear before the Ministry every second weekday for supervised visitations with the candidate Alphas.

4. Alpha Selection:

The Ministry and The Lord shall each select two Alpha candidates for consideration. The selected candidates are as follows:

1. Ministry’s Selections:

1. Demetrius Haworth
2. Bernard Winikus
2. Lord's Selections:
 1. Neville Longbottom
 2. Charles Weasley
5. **Non-Interference:**

The Lord agrees to accept the Ministry's selected candidates, and neither party nor their associates shall interfere with the candidacy of any Alpha.
6. **Time Allocation:**

The Omega shall spend equal time under Ministry supervision with each of the selected Alphas to familiarize herself with them prior to the onset of her subsequent heat.
7. **Omega's Choice:**

At the time of her heat, the Omega retains the right to choose any Alpha for mating, regardless of whether the Alpha was a selected candidate.
8. **Failure to Mate:**

Should the Omega fail to mate during the subsequent heat, she shall be relinquished to Ministry custody. Furthermore, Lord Theodore Nott-Potter shall be sentenced to Azkaban prison for collusion.
9. **Ministry Compliance:**

No additional repercussions are to be taken against House Potter.
If the Ministry violates any clause of this agreement, Minister Kingsley Shacklebolt shall relinquish all political positions immediately and without protest.
10. **Custody of the Omega:**

The Lord shall maintain custody of the Omega until such time as mating has been concluded, ensuring compliance with all terms outlined herein.

Signatories:

In witness whereof, the parties hereto have executed this contract as of the date first written above.

For the Ministry of Magic: Kingsley Shacklebolt, Minister of Magic, First Class Order of Merlin

For the Lord: Lord Harry James Potter, of the Noble House of Potter and the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black, First Class Order of Merlin, Junior Head Auror

Witnesses:

Lord Theodore Tobias Potter né Nott, of the Noble and Ancient House of Nott

Lord Draco Lucius Malfoy, of the Noble and Ancient House of Malfoy and of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black, M.E., ⚔ 604

Draco stamps his signature with his signet ring, leaving the magical crest of his house just as the others had, and passes back the documents to the goblin. The creature inspects them,

nods, and flicks them with the long nail of a gnarled finger. The pages glow momentarily, and he settles them back to the table.

“Should the contract be broken, each of your houses' magic is at stake.” The goblin’s beady eyes shift to Shackbolt. “If further interference occurs from the Ministry into bond magic forged by goblin kind, action will be taken in recompense, Minister.”

They are quiet as the goblin collects his tools and the document, and shuffles from the room. As soon as the door snicks shut, Potter turns on Shackbolt. “Where is she?”

“Wait here.”

... ..

It had been some time since she’d been able to keep from trembling. It was so cold, and she was aching. No matter how she arranged herself in the cell, Hermione couldn’t get comfortable. Her bones protested every position, as if the stone sat directly against her skeleton, and the cramping from her cycle had her biting her lip to contain her whimpers—that morning’s potions were long worn off.

Unable to do anything else, she’d retreated to a corner and made herself as comfortable as possible. Despite her best efforts, lingering exhaustion had her eyelids fluttering shut time and time again, and she dozed in and out of awareness. She was woozy with symptoms from post-heat and the mode of travel that found her there.

Between long blinks, rhythmic footfalls pique her attention. After what felt like hours, she braces herself, curling as small as she can manage until the Minister comes into view, a trio of wix in various dress flanking him. The bars of the cell fall into the stone floor suddenly, allowing them inside with her—all but the Minister reeks like a beta.

She fixes Kingsley in a mean stare, “Minister.”

“*Omega.*”

Hermione expects to be addressed as such this time and doesn’t flinch. But she knows without a doubt she is in danger—completely at the mercy of an alpha who has previously made clear his intent to force her to mate with an alpha of his choosing. Merlin only knew if Harry, Theodore, or Draco were able to intervene before the wizard came to her.

Don’t cower. Don’t cower. Don’t cower.

Hermione untucks herself, sharp pangs of pain sparking in her joints. She presses off the ground onto unsteady legs and relies on the wall to keep her upright, but hopes it bolsters her enough to face him as a witch, not an omega.

“I received your letter,” she says, trying to seem confident.

“Yes, and you have neglected to mate.”

“Speak plainly, Kingsley, I’m in no mood for games. Why am I here?”

Kingsley finds a seat on the poor excuse for a cot three paces ahead of her, arranging his robes and saying, “You failed to fulfill the terms of our prior arrangement.”

Hermione cannot help her flinch, but manages to ask in a strong voice, “In what way? I was made to choose an alpha to see me through my heat.”

“Yes and—”

She interrupts him, “And Draco saw me through my heat.”

“But he did not mate you,” Kingsley states, an eyebrow quirked.

A flush rises up her neck, “Mating was not a requirement.”

“It is now.”

Her heart clenches. He can’t mean to put her in the same position again—in a courtroom filled with alphas to choose from. Or perhaps he has switched tactics and sold her to the highest bidder.

Swallowing the lump in her throat, she nods bravely, “Then I’ll rectify the situation as soon as I return home. Draco has already agreed—”

“I’m afraid it is too late for that.”

Hermione tries not to show her terror, holding back her labored breathing and trembling for a new reason now. She had always been one to feel her emotions plain for the world to see, and in this instance, that could be very bad for her.

She scrambles for any recourse, any earlier planning shot to hell in this short exchange. “Harry should be involved in this... discussion. I am a member of his household, he has a say in my mating—”

“I have just come from a meeting with Mister Potter—he has arranged for your release.”

“He has?” Hermione’s heart leaps, and some of her distress subsides.

“I’ll let Potter explain the nature of our agreement. All I require of you now is to fulfill the immediate condition of your release.” He holds his hands wide, seeming magnanimous. Hermione feels it is a trap.

“What condition would that be?” She presses further into the corner, attention shifting to the several other wix in the cell with them. One wears the colors of a Mediwitch.

“Please step over to Healer Brum, and we will have you on your way.”

“What is the condition?” Hermione asks once more anxiously.

The two betas dressed in plain, unmarked cream robes come toward her. She has nothing to defend herself but to hold out an arm to keep distance.

A hand closes around her wrist, squeezing the oversensitive gland there and sending pain up her arm as she is dragged from the corner. The other beta in cream robes flanks her, gripping her other arm by the bicep. Their combined scents are noxious and make her choke as she is forcibly led to the healer.

“I’ll need you to hold still.”

The witch holds a contraption that looks something like a Muggle neck brace, only very thin, transparent, and with a flared base. It must be made of some sort of fabric as it molds and flexes beneath her fingers, but Hermione had never seen anything like it, which causes her anxiety to turn into hysteria.

She begins to beg, yanking with all of her strength against the two wizards holding her firm. The soreness of her body multiplies as she jerks and resists. “Please, no—please.”

“Keep her still,” the healer commands.

The grips on her become bruising, and she cries out as her arms are twisted behind her back and she’s presented forward. Her shoulders burn, stretched beyond their natural range of motion.

Cold hands probe her neck, and the healer attempts to fit the device around her throat, cutting into her glands, and causing her to shriek and cry. Her vision is blurred by tears as a blunt corner jabs into her windpipe, choking her, and the thing is jimmied up and down against her jaw.

“The collar won’t fit,” the witch declares in frustration.

“That’s impossible,” Kingsley comments, suddenly very close. Something strokes her mating gland, and Hermione’s knees buckle, sending a jolt of pain through her shoulders as her weight is caught by the awkward position they’re forced into.

“It won’t clasp—her jumper keeps getting in the way.”

“Then remove it.”

Her arms are released, and she crumples to the ground, only for the hands to return, this time with the purpose of disrobing her. Draco’s jumper is dragged over her head, pulling at her hair as it tangles in the knit. She is reminded that she struck her head earlier as the yanking disturbs the location of impact.

Everything hurts as she is hoisted back to her feet, and the healer tries once again to fit the device around her throat. Hermione can only sob pitifully as she is manhandled and forced into the *collar*.

After being finagled a short while longer, there is a sickening click-click.

Sorry to end on that scene, it was definitely a bad one. I promise HEA to come and some light fluff between the storm clouds

As always, thanks for reading!

And if you want to join my discord, here is the link! The invite expires after 7 days, so if it doesn't work, leave a comment.

<https://discord.gg/4sqw4WYc>

Chapter 15: Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Notes

Sorry if there are mistakes. I'm posting this on my phone at lunch. I will check it tonight after work.

Update: I have gone back and reposted because my formatting did not carry over on my phone and the italics are important hehe

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Sunday, May 2, 2004 cont...

Draco paces the conference room impatiently, the other three alphas making themselves similarly busy.

It was taking too long for Shackbolt to return with Hermione.

Something had gone wrong.

She was hurt.

Someone had gotten to her.

The portkey malfunctioned and they had no idea where she was—the possibilities taunted him.

As he's concocting more unspeakable horrors in his mind, the knob of the door turns, hinges squeaking open. All four alphas in the room look to the arrival in heavy anticipation and Draco's heart drops to his stomach, nearly making him sick as he takes in the state of his witch.

Hermione holds herself in bare, trembling arms that show bruising. Her hair is a mess and matted on one side with what appears to be blood. Her face, which had seemed healthy this morning, is palid and tearstreaked. And there were awful red marks along her throat and shoulders, clearly made by whatever that *thing* on her neck was.

Wet brown eyes flutter up, unfocused and searching. They glance over him and fall on Harry.

The little witch keens, breath stuttering as she limps the few steps into Potter's arms, sagging against him. He collects her in a careful embrace, otherwise frozen in shock like the rest of them.

Her breathing is shallow, hitching, and she winces as if even that is too deep. Her fingernails are bloodied, like she'd been scratching at something or someone—maybe she had probed her wounded head. The bruises on her arms appear to be fingerprints, spaced the distance of a grown man's hand and there is a red mark banding around her closest wrist like someone had held it tightly as she tugged and fought against them—right over her scent gland.

Wounded. Bloodied. Trembling.

“What have you done to her?” Theodore shouts—the first to find the words.

“Be assured there is no serious damage to the omega. It seems the portkey deposited her more forcefully than intended—”

“*Stop talking,*” he spits with venom like the snake he is. Draco stalks forward to Potter and his witch, inspecting her more closely at this distance, one of his hands hovering in the space between them, unsure if he should touch her.

She peaks out of the wizard's chest at him. Her eyes are hollowed and red from crying, barely focused. But she lets out a wet gasp, reaching out to him and gripping his jumper in a fist.

“Draco.”

He shudders a breath, horrified and relieved and furious. His hand whispers over her bare shoulder, afraid to cause her further harm. He settles to place his palm over her fisted hand, smoothing it flat against his heart—her fingers are like ice.

“Here,” he prompts her gently, pulling away from her touch and quickly relinquishing his jumper. Potter helps keep her upright, creating enough space to maneuver as Draco guides the witch slowly into the jumper, sliding it carefully over her tacky curls and helping to fit her arms through as she winces in pain. She sags back against Harry once they're done.

Fixating on the blood in her hairline, Draco chokes out his next question, “Who hurt you?”

Dull brown eyes squeeze shut, and Hermione buries her face into Potter's chest, her trembling intensifying. She gasps a soft, defeated whine into the Auror, and some vital organ dislodges itself in Draco's chest, stricken him. Like hands have pried his ribs apart, reached inside, and stolen *something* inside. The hollowed pit burns and aches as he stands helpless against this situation, knowing he'll carry this moment, this *loss* until he dies. A line has been crossed today, there would be no going back, and it was all his fault.

He was so confident they would be capable of protecting Hermione against the threats of their world, their Ministry, and alphas. She was never meant to be exposed like this. Never supposed to be at the mercy of the ministry—not again. But he had failed her. He promised her they had the time to wait and consider, only to place her in more danger by refusing to mate her when she asked.

Stupid. Idiotic. Selfish. Unworthy. Fool.

Guilt and shame and alpha pheromones stagnating in the room clog his throat. He swallows around the lump. Swallows again, again.

Everything Hermione feared has come true.

Draco's vision swims.

Theodore comes around behind Hermione, his breathing ragged, pupils swallowing his irises. He reaches for the witch, lifting the tousled curtain of her curls off of her neck, inspecting the *thing* around her neck poking awkwardly out of the jumper. "What is *this*?"

He and Potter take notice as well, Harry going as far as to brush a finger across the translucent surface of whatever *it* is around her throat as he supports her with his other arm. Hermione whimpers in protest, pulling away from the attention so immediately her knees buckle. He lunges for her, but Potter manages to catch her before she collapses to the floor. They help her back to unsteady feet, and she pants in their arms, eyes darting blindly between them, distraught, hyperventilating, and near subspace.

"Hermione, love—"

"Ah, yes. The protective garment." Kingsley interjects, seeming all too pleased. "Quite the ingenious accessory—it was adapted from historical records by our healers and is modeled to fit securely around the mating glands. It will ensure the omega remains intact while away from the ministry, as per our agreement."

"You've *collared* her," Adalrik murmurs in disbelief, uttering more in his native language. Draco looks at Theodore and Potter, who wear matching expressions of disgusted horror.

Shacklebolt glances at the other alpha, looking like it's the first he's noticed his being there. He follows the assessment of the wizard with, "And you are?"

Rik squares himself to the Minister, exuding confidence the way alphas can. "I am Miss Granger's healer—from Germany."

The Minister hides his surprise poorly. "From Germany?"

"As I said," Rik bares his teeth just slightly.

Draco takes a slow, deep breath, then another, hoping to calm himself down—to calm his magic down. But the pheromones have only thickened, and Hermione's scent is sour and metallic. The mingling smells aren't enough on their own to tip him over the edge. But how unsteady his omega is on her feet, even with her weight shifted to Potter, the fact that someone had touched her, hurt her, and that *thing*, that *collar*—His magic is a riot within him, and his control is finally worn to nothing. He is deafened, the blood rushing in his head too loud to discern speech. His shoulders heave like he's run a marathon.

All of the furniture in the room begins to rattle, jumping off the carpeted floor and migrating in the direction of the Minister, coalescing into a barrier. The table flips, its solid surface pressing the Minister against the far wall of the room as chairs pile against its back, crushing him before he can react defensively.

Adalrik is at his shoulder, shaking him, but it does nothing to deter his outburst of magic.

Shacklebolt's eyes are wide and afraid as he struggles against the attacking furniture, unable to reach his wand where he's pinned against the wall. He cries out, the call sharp and desperate but meaningless to Draco's ears.

They'd hurt Hermione. Threatened her. Abducted her from her home. He needed to protect her. He needed to make her safe again. To eliminate all threats to her—starting with Kingsley Shacklebolt. The furniture heaves closer to the wall, wood splintering and metal warping as it desperately tries to obey Draco's thoughts.

A small, cold hand closes around the first two fingers of Draco's left hand.

The touch startles him from his outburst, weakening the trembling of the room. He distractedly meets Hermione's brown gaze. His witch watches him with needy eyes, tears spilling off her thick lashes one after the next. Her lips move, but he cannot hear her. He *needs* to hear her, and crowds closer, dipping his head.

She takes a stuttered breath, deep and warbled, and murmurs weakly, *"Please—take me home."*

It's visceral, his reaction to her plea. His magic abruptly cuts off, broken chairs that had piled up against the underside of the table toppling with a crash as he nods, stepping into her. Hermione sidles up to him, allowing him to scoop her into his arms despite her injuries.

Hoisted and secure in his hold, their faces are a breath apart, and she shuts her eyes, leaning her forehead against his as another tear escapes. It takes a moment longer for his magic to settle properly, and he spends it brushing their noses together and whispering, *"I've got you, love."*

Shuddering, she tucks into his throat, breathing deeply overtop his scent gland. A shiver crawls down his spine, and he curls her closer to his chest, his internal turmoil fading into a more singular focus: Getting Hermione to safety. Without waiting for the other alphas, he makes for the door.

"Wait!" Kingsley Shacklebolt grunts in his alpha tone as he struggles to shove the overturned table away. The Minister's voice is like being drenched in ice water, and he goes rigid.

Potter steps past them, muttering, "Portkey," under his breath.

Draco remembers the bent spoon in his pocket and he makes a quick plan to access it as Harry faces down the Minister. Shacklebolt finally manages to free himself from the debris and staggers a step forward before turning an accusatory finger in Draco's direction, a sneer on his face, "You attacked me."

He sniffs, possessing a complete lack of remorse for his actions.

The enraged wizard straightens his robes with a sharp tug, wielding his authority clumsily. "Auror Potter, arrest this delinquent alpha for attacking your Minister." His voice echoes in the room, each syllable dripping with indignation.

Harry's gaze flickers between them, jaw working as he weighs his response. Draco beats him to it.

"British Wizarding Alpha Protection Decree, Section I: Exemption from Accountability for Magical Incidents," he recites in a voice like gravel. "Alphas are granted immunity from prosecution for any accidental or uncontrolled magic when it involves an Omega. Including, but not limited to: involuntary magical outbursts, instinctive reactionary magic, and unintentional harm due to magic." Draco glares at the Minister.

Harry sighs, rubbing his anger from his brow before responding diplomatically. "He's correct, Kingsley. Malfoy's actions, while *unfortunate*, were instinctual and accidental. He was reacting to the state of his omega—"

"His omeg—" The Minister's voice cuts off in a vicious hiss. His hands clench at his sides. "Omega Granger is *not his*."

"Even so. The provision ensures that Alphas cannot be legally held responsible for magical mishaps—such as this one." Potter tells the enraged wizard with finality.

"We have an *understanding*, Mister Potter—the omega will entertain the four chosen alphas until her next heat. *Not* including Draco Malfoy!"

Potter's jaw ticks, and his mate takes a step toward him. "The terms of our deal do not explicitly exclude Malfoy from the prospects of Hermione's alpha—"

"Then let us amend it!" the Minister spits.

Glaring at the alpha attempting to take everything from him, Draco imagines what he might do to him if given the chance. The spells, the tricks—there was more magic in the world than Unforgivables. And though his wand will have monitoring charms until his death to ensure no misuse of magic outside of the realm of his designation, there are ways around the surveillance. Salazar, he'd resort to muggle methods if it came to it.

Hermione's fingers tighten, curling into his shirt like she's afraid he'll disappear. She hiccoughs a few stuttered breaths against his clavicle, sounding strained. Something sharp and protective clenches inside him, nudging the pit opened in his chest.

"They have an agreement between themselves—"

"Hermione Granger is not Alpha Malfoy's omega! " the Minister snarls.

Words burn like fire on his tongue, but he bites them back as Theodore steps up beside his mate, blocking the Minister—a silent demand for restraint, or at the very least, a warning any action taken now would only worsen their current situation. A warning to whom, though, Draco isn't sure.

"Minister," Theodore says evenly, voice edged with finality, "I believe our business is concluded for today."

Kingsley's eyes cut between them all, lingering on Hermione before settling on Draco. There's something there—hesitation, unease, outrage. Whatever he sees in Draco's leer, it makes him recoil bodily. He recovers a beat later, eyes dashing away as he flourishes his fine robes. "Beginning tomorrow, Omega Granger is expected in Chamber L at 10 o'clock sharp to interact with the alpha candidates. I will take the liberty of notifying each alpha and scheduling the visits to ensure fairness. She will be allowed a single chaperone."

Rik steps forward in protest. "Hermione is not recovered—"

"No exceptions." The Minister's tone is dismissive, final.

"Give us one week," Theodore says bravely, continuing before Shacklebolt can get in a word. "Hermione is ill from heat and injured from your portkey. She can hardly stand on her own."

As if on cue, Hermione slackens in Draco's arms, causing him to need to adjust. He stares down at her face, her expression blank—unconscious. His magic surges again, a dangerous crackle across his skin, causing the hairs on his arms to stand on end. *His* witch should have never suffered this.

"Look at her!" Theodore demands. Kingsley's attention darts to Hermione, and he notices her state of consciousness with widening eyes. "She needs time to recover. Can't you see that? Can't you see what you've done to her?"

Shacklebolt's mouth opens. Shuts. Theodore is stopped from taking another step toward the Minister by his mate, but the restraint of the Gryffindor is clearly also being tested.

A decision is made, shown plainly in the wizard's hardening expression. "*Fine*. One week from tomorrow. 10 o'clock."

With a final glance, the Minister clears out of the destroyed conference room.

Those remaining collectively exhale. Draco has to keep his knees from buckling in relief.

Potter is first to recover, "Stay here."

He pulls his wand and ducks out into the hallway, the door snicking shut behind him. Then, Theodore is at Draco's side, a gentle hand cradling Hermione's shoulder as he checks on her. "Did you see when she lost consciousness?"

"I felt her go slack," he nods. "Only a minute ago."

"Could be the subspace," Rik says, coming up on their other side. He carefully probes her matted curls, fingers coming away tacky with blood. "She is needing to be treated. I do not like the look of this wound."

Potter comes back into the room from where Draco can only assume he was surveying the hall, "We'll take a portkey out of here. There won't be a safe way to bring her out—not today."

Potter draws his portkey from his pocket—the misshapen salt shaker.

“Grab on.”

... ..

It's the unpleasant sensation of being hooked behind the naval and dragged through space that rouses her, but she hasn't the strength to open her eyes. The arms around her are sturdy. The chest she is tucked into is warm and familiar-smelling. There are a handful of voices speaking as wind rustles tree branches and ducks splash in water somewhere nearby. Spring wind nips at her exposed skin. She is cold.

Hermione means to say something, but words don't come to her. All that manages to escape is a quiet whimper.

“Hold on, love. Nearly home.” *Theodore*. “Malfoy, can you manage?”

“I've got her,” confirms a low, comforting voice near her ear as the arms around her adjust minutely.

“I'll go first.” *Harry*.

There's a soft *whoosh*. Some exchange is made, and then the intense pressure of side-along disapparation leaves her head throbbing as they deposit somewhere new with a *CRACK*.

More cracks of apparation come, then she recognizes the sound of hurried feet on paving stones. She is carried forward, and an old door opens with protest.

Ushered by the sounds of bodies shuffling into a tight space with carpeted wooden floors, Draco asks softly, “Where should I put her?”

Harry replies. “Upstairs, second door on the left.”

“Rik—”

“I will be getting my things,” her healer responds, footsteps receding elsewhere.

The air becomes thick with the scent of Harry and Theo as she is rocked back and forth, ascending up stairs, and she knows they are back in Grimmauld—safe once more. Though, at this point, the word *safe* feels as if it doesn't belong in her vocabulary anymore.

She attempts to form words again, her tongue heavy in her mouth, her throat sore and dry. A nonsense syllable makes it out, quiet and pitiful. “*Whu...*”

“I've got you, Hermione,” Draco tells her as another door opens on creaking hinges.

She must manage to speak his name aloud because he confirms it. “I'm here, love. We're all here—Potter and Nott, and the Germans. We're at Grimmauld. We're home.”

Hermione is lowered, the warmth of her alpha receding, and she grabs for him in protest with a weak curl of her fingers, not wanting to part from him even as her aching body settles against a soft bed.

“Don’... leave me,” she begs on a weak breath.

Draco’s hand closes around hers, his grip firm but careful. “I’m not going anywhere,” he promises, smoothing blood-damp curls from her sweaty brow.

She cracks her eyes open to the dim bedroom and turns her face to meet their gazes. A sharp stab of pain from something cutting into one of the tender glands at the base of her throat causes her to gasp and freeze, scrunching her eyes back shut against the sensation. The sequence of motions starts a throb at the back of her head where she’d taken the impact of the landing from her earlier impromptu portkey travel.

“Is it your head?” he asks, voice thick with worry.

“My...” She tentatively probes at her throat, feeling a foreign material there instead of her own soft skin. The memory of hands restraining her and the ‘healer’ manhandling her into the device draws a small keening whine from her. The hand around hers squeezes, the man attached trembling.

“I’m sorry,” Draco whispers so quietly she barely hears him. “I’m so sorry, Hermione.”

She opens her tearful eyes and manages to look at him. The expression he wears can only be described as devastation. It pulls a fresh wave of tears from her, a wet breath passing her lips as he leans forward and kisses her knuckles, shaking his head.

The other side of the bed dips, and a weight settles next to her. The smell of another omega greets her sensitive nose, and she flinches at her first inhale of sour anxiety. Cool fingers prod the pulse point at her wrist, avoiding her inflamed scent glands expertly. She flitters her gaze to the lanky omega wizard crouched on his knees beside her. In her peripheral vision—which swims with unshed tears—more people shuffle into the room.

“Heartbeat fast... and possibly hypothermic,” Wilf mutters, his touch moving to the delicate skin beneath her jaw, brushing her messy curls away. The hand retreats like the slight touch of her throat burned him. “What—what is *that*?”

Hermione squeezes her eyes shut again. Rik answers his brother in German, the omega making a horrified noise. The murmur of voices in the corner halts, and someone in the room retches.

“Oh, my love,” Theodore murmurs as great, breathless sobs begin. She doesn’t need to open her eyes to know it is Harry.

Wilf shuffles on the bed, moving toward the foot as something settles on the mattress next to Hermione’s feet. Rik speaks to her in a voice of gentle authority, “Let me see you, Mäuschen.”

He comes beside her, Draco shifting out of the way, but keeping a hand on her, his fingertips brushing against her unblemished temple. She peeks her eyes open at the hovering alphas as Rik repeats the cursory observations his brother had, instructing the younger wizard, “*Bruder*, the blanket.”

The covers slide over Hermione and Rik performs a charm. Warmth envelops her.

“Tell me where you are hurt, Mäuschen—where it is worst.”

Everywhere, she is tempted to say, but croaks, “My head, shoulder...throat.”

“What did they do to you?” Wilf prods, brave enough to ask what no one else has yet dared.

Hermione mulls over the truth—words she is reluctant to share—as Rik gently maneuvers her to take a better look at the side of her head matted with blood. He sucks his teeth. “Can you swallow?”

She makes a sound of affirmation, moving past Wilf’s question. Retrieving a tin case from within his bag, Rik produces a small, corked vial, which he helps her drink. Because it is Adalrik, she doesn’t think twice about taking the concoctions he prescribes—though at first taste she almost regrets her trust, gagging.

“What is that?” Draco asks for her.

“Blood replenishment. And this one is for pain.” He feeds her the next one and she chokes the combined flavor down—barely.

“Water?” she begs.

“I will get it,” Wilf volunteers, leaving the room.

“I am believing the laceration behaves worse than is—head wounds are fickle,” Rik comments, again prodding her scalp with careful hands. “But I worry of concussion. Look here.”

The wizard has her follow his finger, then his wand light with each eye. She flinches away from the brightness at his first attempt, and her head swims. All the combined sensations, including the taste of the potions still potent on her tongue, make her feel severely ill. She wishes she was back in her nest, curled up in the safety of her alpha... *how had everything gone so wrong? They should have never left the flat.*

“Does your head and neck ache?” The healer abandons his tests for questions. “Do you experience nausea or spinning? Doubles vision? Weakness?”

“Yes,” Hermione tells him, trying to keep from vomiting up the potions. Wilf returns with a glass half-full of water, helping her sip it as Rik rummages through his healer bag. He retrieves a book.

“Our kind so rarely experience serious head injury. It is best to being safe though, yes, Mäuschen?”

With that, he begins a diagnostic spell, careful to consult his brother on the readings for accuracy. All he needs from her is to lie still—a task Hermione is grateful to perform. Draco remains at the head of the bed, removing his touch as instructed by the German wizards as a wand hovers above her face tracing paths around her cranium. The only sounds in the room are the mumblings of her healers, Draco's soft breathing, and indiscernible whispers punctuated by the odd sob from the corner of the room.

After several minutes and some debate, the brothers determine that she indeed has a concussion, as well as a fracture on her skull. And though the diagnostic indicates that all would heal in time, they decide to give her a bone-mending potion to be safe. Especially considering the effort her body is already exerting to recover from her heat.

With the diagnosis, she is given more unpalatable potions, her head wound is gently cleansed by Wilf, and bandaged, and her hair is swept out of the way—too matted with blood to get clean in her current state. The brothers address her other injuries, working around the most sensitive of her remaining afflictions as it poses no immediate threat. When they have inspected the bruising of her skin, the minor tear in the rotator cuff of the shoulder she landed on then had wrenched this way and that, and the mild hypothermia that had set in, it is finally time to address her *collar*.

The whimper that escapes her as Rik carefully probes the device is involuntary, and Draco's hand cradling the crown of her head tenses.

“Entschuldigung, Mäuschen,” Rik apologizes regretfully as he continues his inspection. His fingers are warm, tracing the boundaries of the device. It encloses her throat from the hinge of her jaw to the ridge of her clavicle, not exactly solid but rigid enough it restricts her full range of motion. And the snugness of it prods her sensitive glands with any movement more than the tilt of her chin or shift of her eyes. Hermione feels like she is choking on it.

“Can you remove it?” she asks in a whisper once her healer extricates himself from her personal space. The alphas exchange a dark look. Hermione's heart drops and she tries to keep her chin from trembling as tears threaten to pour out of her once more.

“Could I have the room?” a hoarse voice asks. Harry clears his throat.

Draco hesitates only a moment, sharing a look with one of the wizards she can't set eyes on. His grey eyes lower to her a moment later and he sweeps his thumb across her brow, leaning down and pressing a kiss to her forehead. He follows Rik and Wilf from the bedroom.

Theodore is last to leave, “I'll be just outside.”

Hermione listens to Harry make his way over to her side anxiously, incapable of moving to watch his approach. He sinks down beside her, not facing her, a hand scrubbing through his unruly black hair.

Letting out a long, shaking breath, he finally turns and meets her gaze. The green of his eyes is brilliant against the red ringing his eyes from crying. As they look at each other, his expression crumples and he lets out a wet sob, face returning to his hands.

“Harry?” It’s a question—encapsulating everything she cannot ask with more clarity. She *cannot* put into words any of her worries because she’s not sure she can stomach the answers.

“Harry?” she prods, her weak grip closing around his forearm, trying to pull him out of his hands.

She shakes him and his name comes again, desperate. A plea.

What’s wrong?

Are we safe?

Are you okay?

He needs to be okay. She needs him to be okay. She needs him to tell her that they’ll be okay.

How did you get me back? What aren’t you telling me?

What deal was made? What was the price?

What else was taken from me? How long until they come for me again?

Will I ever be safe? Can I ever be free of this?

Her voice threatens to break. “Harry? Please.”

He sobs, shaking his head. “Hermione.”

“*Harry*,” she cries.

He finally looks at her, lips quivering as he attempts to form words.

She’s so afraid.

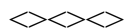
“I couldn’t,” he finally gasps, clutching his heart over his shirt as he squeezes his eyes shut and sobs. “I couldn’t fix it.”

Ice seeps into her body, her shivering beginning again, deep in her spine.

“I’m so sorry, Hermione. I had to. I had to.”

Bile burns up her throat. She swallows it down.

“It’s all my fault.”



Lying stiffly on the bed, Hermione holds herself—afraid she'll fall to pieces if she loosens her grip. Harry's words echo, burning themselves into the forefront of her mind so she can't forget them, even as she tries desperately to.

...public announcement...

...forced hand...

...negotiated the least horrible outcome...

...contract notarized by a goblin ...sealed with magic...

...four candidate alphas ...two from the ministry, two from the list...

...supervised audiences every second day...

...must choose a mate ...onset of next heat...

Each new detail is more sickening than the last. Each one worming deeper under her skin. She attempts to keep her breathing shallow and even, trying to control her body's reaction, knowing she won't manage to for very long.

Harry sits silently at her side, head returned to his hands, also taking slow, deliberate breaths—like someone trying not to vomit, or scream.

Hermione wishes that he would. Wishes one of them would do something. Would say something.

His voice had been so weak as he told her all of it. How there would be no loopholes, no avoiding the deal... he'd sealed it with house magic in hopes of stopping Kingsley's tirade, and the others had witnessed it under the same stakes—the loss of their magic.

Harry had set the terms and made promises of *her*.

Without her consent.

Without her knowledge.

Because what else was he to do? How else could he have protected her *and* Theodore? His hand had been *forced*.

All he could do was react...and choose the least offensive path forward.

Hermione stares at the ceiling like if she looked hard enough she'd find the answers she needed.

But no magic or miracles would get them out of this now.

She'd lost.

Her lips part, voice raspy, "What's going to happen now?"

Harry doesn't look up. Doesn't move.

Silence hangs between them.

She can't stand it.

Her voice is thick as she turns away from him, tears sliding down her cheeks, "Harry—*I want to be alone.*"

Chapter End Notes

...I hope you ?enjoyed? !

Chapter 16: Chapter Sixteen

Chapter Summary

Hopefully, a satisfactory resolution to the angst I left you with... and of course, MORE DRAMA

Chapter Notes

It has been far too long since I've posted. I do apologize. And while I cannot promise consistency or speed, I will complete this fic eventually, and I appreciate everyone who has stuck by me.

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Wednesday, May 5, 2004

Hermione lay staring at her nestroom wall, the covers pulled up to her chin, heavy and warm. Her mind had ground to a stop. There was so much to think about that she'd become entirely overwhelmed and lost the ability to. Each time she began to settle on something, the thought flittered away. The familiar torrent of her mind churning like sludge, hardly progressing at all. All she knew for certain now was how *impossible* it felt.

Time passed strangely, measured with each visit she was paid. Dally entered the room with soft steps, coaxed her to sit up, fed her a potion with tea, and gave her something small to eat. It felt like minutes between each visit, only she knew it couldn't be.

Somewhere in the back of her mind, Hermione knew she was acting unreasonably. Falling apart from the news might be a rational response, but hiding from her loved ones...

She had lain awake for hours, remembering the fear of waiting in that cell, the hands on her, the threats and intimidation from the Minister. Her insides wouldn't stop writhing, twisting—knotting with anxiety. With revolt and disgust and the lingering sensations of the violation she'd suffered. The collar locked around her throat, now providing a physical reminder of the Ministry's overreach with each breath.

Sometime early the morning after her retrieval, Hermione had numbly gotten out of bed, passed through the sleeping house, and slipped through the floo without a word. She'd found herself in the loo, discarding her clothing and staring at her naked body in the mirror. All the blood, the bruises, and the contraption half choking her, staring back. She'd clawed and fought against the buckle. Broke her nails on it and rubbed her throat raw, attempting to get it

off. She couldn't see for the tears pouring from her eyes, couldn't speak beyond her hoarse wailing.

Dally became distraught, so distraught she'd intervened—incapacitated her.

Hermione woke. Clean, dressed, and surrounded by the smell of Draco, cradled in the remains of their recent nest. Her elf had cared for her and deposited her someplace safe—the only thing she could do, and the thing she was best at.

It was a necessary kindness. But it came with its own challenges.

All of the progress she had been making seemed to be unraveling before her eyes.

The wants and needs she had begun to understand and accept were dissipating from her mind. The alpha she had chosen, whom she found comfort in and a sense of infallibility. The one person she could even tolerate imagining a future with... no longer an option. And to be surrounded by him, by his scent, by the reminder of his tolerance and tenderness, seeing her through her most vulnerable state... it made her insides ache with loss. It was as if she'd begun grieving a loved one. An amputation of herself.

Each time she closed her eyes, she couldn't help but see his. Intense. Grey. Watching her in the archives. Following her as she moved. Tracing her lips as she spoke. Worrying over her. Drinking her in.

To lose that—to lose *him* now. Now, after everything. And to start the process anew with *four* alphas—Hermione was defaulting to fight or flight, and in her current state, there was only one actionable option. One path that felt safe.

Recoil. Cower. Flee. Hide.

So she had. And she was overcome by that decision. She was fading into nothingness. Losing the threads of herself to the Omega. Pouring herself out into the safety of her deformed instincts until she was left vacant and quiet.

But something kept her from complete submission, tethering her in her body. A faint and familiar scent, thin and weak beyond the intense saturation of her heat pheromones, of the weakening traces of Draco's musk—*Harry*. Her best and most loyal friend.

Half of her heart.

Each slow and measured breath slipped him back into the forefront of her mind. All of her scattered focus settled on the tinge of his smell in the room, intrinsic to the space after so many years of helping and protecting her.

A smell that always signaled safety and comfort.

It reminded her now of the way he'd looked at her when trying to explain the deal struck with the Minister—or rather, the way he'd avoided looking at her. The pallor of his face. The tremble of his hands and chin. The shine in his green eyes and the hitch in his voice. How sick reliving it for her seemed to make him.

Harry, who would do anything to keep her safe and well. Who had done *everything* to ensure she'd been safe for so long. Who, even now, when her future was plucked from their control, was fighting tooth and nail for her...

Overwhelmed by the idea of Harry suffering, after all he's done for her—because of her—Hermione finds the strength to struggle out of bed. Fear to leave the safety of her space and suffer the consequences again rushes into the empty cavities she'd been carving out inside of herself, but she—Hermione and not the omega—steels herself against all of it. She would rather have Harry—be with her loved ones—for however long her biology allowed rather than forfeit them early because of her own fear and stubbornness.

On weak legs, she pads through the flat and steps through the floo back into Grimmauld Place.

It's dark and quiet, and she realizes she has no idea the time or day. She wanders through the old house, climbing the stairs to Harry and Theodore's bedroom, finding them sound asleep there. Harry is curled in Theodore's arms, his face contorted even in sleep, swollen from crying. A pang lances through Hermione, and she slides down to sit against the door jamb silently, tears dripping off her cheeks.

She's been so unfair, so selfish. To leave as she'd done was awful.

There's a hitch of breath, and then Harry is sitting up in bed, bleary-eyed, squinting through the dark at the open bedroom door.

Hermione wipes her cheeks, whispering, "I'm so sorry."

He gasps, throwing off the covers and waking Theo. He's upon her in an instant, gathering her up into his warm hug, "*Hermione*."

"I'm sorry, Harry. I'm so sorry," she tells him again. "Thank you. Thank you for coming for me. I'm sorry I left—"

"No, *I'm* sorry," he chokes, pulling back and brushing her hair back from her face, still squinting blindly at her. The bedside lamp clicks on. "I should have found another way."

She shakes her head, hiding her face in his jumper. He tries to lift her chin, but his hand brushes against the collar, and she winces, her throat tender and swollen from the contraption. A deeper worry enters his tone, "Is it the... how bad is it?"

Theodore is suddenly there too, passing Harry his glasses and catching Hermione's elbow, giving it a gentle squeeze. "Will you let us see, love?"

Hermione's bottom lip trembles, but she carefully collects her hair out of the way to reveal her throat, marred with purples and reds, bruising and burst blood vessels, chafing, and scratch marks from her nails. Their eyes darken, Harry's hands going to fists.

Hermione looks away, swallowing thickly, "Is there any way to get it off?"

The alphas share a thoughtful glance, but don't appear optimistic.

Letting her hair fall back around her face and conceal her neck, Hermione picks at her broken fingernails.

“Are you tired? Would you like to lie down?” Harry asks.

“No,” Hermione says at once. “If I lie down again, I won’t get back up.” Her voice wobbles despite her effort to steady it.

She swallows and changes the subject. “Wilf and Rik?”

“They had to go,” Theodore says. “Rik will come back once Wilf’s heat has passed.” He takes her hands in his, stilling her fingers before she can bloody her nail beds. After a beat, he adds, “We sent Malfoy home for the time being, too. But if you’d like him to come back—”

“No.” The word tastes foul on her tongue. Hermione squeezes her eyes shut and forces it out again, steadier this time. “No. It’s better if he stays away. If I can’t have him—” Her breath catches, her heart breaking over again. “I shouldn’t taunt myself with him now that he’s out of reach.”

Harry’s brow furrows. “What do you mean?”

She looks up at him, chin trembling. “The ministry deal.”

Something shifts in Harry’s expression—his color draining, shame flashing too quickly to hide.

“What about it, Hermione?” Theodore asks carefully.

She hesitates, suddenly uncertain, then says it anyway.

“The four alphas.” Her voice breaks. “Draco isn’t one of them.”

Silence hangs one heartbeat, two.

“Oh,” Harry breathes. His eyes widen as he looks at Theo. “Oh. Hermione—no.”

She frowns, glancing between them. Confusion knits her brow. Theodore’s expression changes—realization dawning, slow and awful. Harry looks stricken.

“Hermione,” Harry says softly, shifting closer, “I’m so sorry. There’s been a misunderstanding.”

Her pulse skids. “What?”

Theodore speaks quickly now, seeing her distress rise. “Until your next heat, you’re meant to meet with the four selected alphas, yes—but that’s not the end of it. You still have a choice.”

She shakes her head, breath shallow. “A choice between the four alphas.”

“But not only them,” Harry says. “I should have explained it better.”

Theo continues, gentler. “When the time comes, you’re free to choose anyone.”

Her mouth opens. No sound comes out. Then—

“...Draco,” she says, barely more than a breath.

They both nod.

Her shoulders sag, something inside her giving way. “You’re saying I can—I could still pick him?”

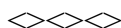
Harry presses his forehead briefly to hers. “Yes. You’re not being asked to replace him.” His voice softens. “You just have to endure a little longer.”

A tear slips free down her cheek.

“...Then I haven’t lost him.”

“No,” Theo says firmly. “You haven’t.”

Hermione exhales, long and shuddering, the weight on her chest easing just enough for her to breathe.



Wrapped in blankets on the sofa, Hermione stares accusingly at the armchair she’d been abducted from. So welcoming and unassuming. Harry returned to the parlor carrying a tray with a water pitcher and glasses. His eyes were red-rimmed, but he smiled warmly at her. Pouring her a drink, he carried it over, holding it out to her. She hesitated to accept it, and the alpha wizard winced, instead setting it down on the side table.

“I suppose it’s going to be hard to trust anything for a while,” he says. He sank onto the couch beside her, and she leaned into him automatically, shutting her eyes and breathing in the familiar comfort of his and Theodore’s scents. Curling an arm around her shoulders, he kisses her forehead, “I’m sorry I wasn’t able to keep you safe. It was arrogant to think—”

She shushes him, “It wasn’t your fault.”

His breath stutters, and he hugs her closer.

They rest like that a while, not acknowledging anything outside of the dimly lit parlor. Despite everything, she knew there was nowhere safer for her than right here, in the home of the people who loved her most. And there was no place else she would rather be.

Hermione is resting just shy of sleep when the front door of Grimmauld opens on its squeaking hinges.

Theo is back.

Pushing aside the blankets she'd cocooned underneath, Hermione stands and quickly goes to the hall, staring at the arrivals. Theodore smiles when he sees her, but steps to the side, revealing, "Draco."

In between breaths, he's closed the distance, and she's in his arms. Without meaning to, she lets out a soft sob, fingers tightening in his robes as she buries herself in his chest. His arms wind her closer, his lips pressing gently against her temple.

"I thought, I thought I couldn't—" she stammers.

"I know, love. I'm right here. I promised, remember? I'm not going anywhere."

... ..

It had taken Hermione a while to settle after he'd arrived. At first, she'd tried to sit independently on the sofa but quickly abandoned that for his lap. She'd fitted herself into the bends of his body in an effort to embed herself against him, face tucked near his scent gland. From her heat, he'd learned that wedging herself into the smallest place she could was how she felt most secure. His ability to offer her that security and comfort even now is a privilege. One he wouldn't take for granted.

Nott and Potter were recollecting the events of the ministry and the bargain made with Kingsley over again, in more detail, so there were no further misunderstandings. Hermione lay still against him, but Draco could feel her listening and minutely reacting to all of the information as it was given.

Draco couldn't begin to understand what she was feeling. But without a doubt, the events of the past days had done irreparable damage. He felt flayed himself. His nerves and insides exposed. And he was terrified to take his eyes from her for fear she'd disappear again.

They'd been so close to losing her—the thought repeated like a heartbeat, steady and sickening.

But it wasn't the event itself—the sudden emptiness of her chair, the awful hours that followed—that tortured him most. It was the way she'd looked when Potter came out of the bedroom after they'd gotten her back. She lay there so still, like a corpse. A beautiful, terrible corpse.

He should have mated her when she'd asked. Should have confessed everything. Should have shared his infatuation with her since their school days. Should have promised he would become anything for her, do anything for her. Why hadn't he told her how much he loves her before now?

Draco cradles her closer, as if his arms around her might prove to the universe he deserved another chance to keep her safe. He would accept her fear and her frustration, and her anger. He would remain steadfast as they navigated this next trial. It terrified him the idea of another wizard taking advantage of her. Broke him to think she might choose some other alpha, but he would protect her choice. After everything, he owed her that much.

Hermione turns out of his throat, placing her ear against his heart as he realizes Nott and Potter have finished speaking. Draco traces the contour of her nose to her lips with his eyes. She's so beautiful.

"Who are the four alphas?" she finally asks.

Draco tenses, and Hermione's hand, which covers his where he's rested it on her waist, squeezes.

"We chose Neville and Charlie from our list. And the ministry selected Demetrius Haworth and Bernard Winikus," Harry tells her, looking worse for wear himself.

"I don't know those names," Hermione says weakly.

"I looked into them," Draco tells her. She looks up at him with those big, brown eyes.

"Demetrius Haworth is thirty. He's an intermediary and informal advisor within Ministry circles. He holds a minor Wizengamot seat. He has a modest fortune and no real political power, but he built a network of loyalty during the war by connecting individuals, securing favors, and quietly ensuring outcomes within the ministry. Many of the prominent ministry officials now owe him debts, or their positions."

"He's the sort of wizard who remembers names, secrets, and favors," Harry adds. "He's a good friend of some of the DMLE. I see him in our offices from time to time. From what I can tell, he's well-liked."

Hermione nods, but Draco notices she's lost some of the color in her cheeks. He lifts a hand, tracing the line of her jaw. She looks at him again. "Alright?"

It's hesitant, but she nods. "I'd like to be prepared."

He continues, "Bernard Winikus is forty-one and will inherit the Winikus potions and ingredients European distribution empire, though his current position in his family is precarious. They grow increasingly impatient with his refusal to marry and produce an heir. But he is only interested in—"

"An omega."

Draco nods.

Hermione looks at Harry and Theodore, "Have you spoken to Neville or Charlie?"

Potter nods, suddenly anxious-looking.

"We've actually arranged for them to come to Grimmauld today."

Hermione stills, so does he.

"If you prefer, we can meet them elsewhere," Theodore tells his witch gently. "We weren't sure when you'd come back, and we didn't want to leave Grimmauld in case. But if it makes

you more comfortable, we'll find someplace else."

"I..." she looks up at him, eyes pleading. "You'll stay?"

"Yes," Draco assures her.

Hermione turns back to the room, "I'm not sure I'd like to see them, but they can come here."

"We can manage that," Theodore nods.



Hermione sits in the breakfast nook in the kitchen, staring out the window that overlooks a small, private courtyard and an abandoned greenhouse. Theodore and Harry barely used the space. Sometimes, if the weather was good, they would eat dinner out there, but that was a rare occasion.

She knew it was magically constructed. None of the other townhouses had the additional recreational area between the alleyway and the back entrance. But somewhere along the way, someone thought 12 Grimmauld Place needed a courtyard. For growing potions ingredients, perhaps, or for children to play in.

Maybe Harry and Theodore's children would play there. Maybe they would tear out the pavers and make it grassy and welcoming. Maybe it would become their own secret paradise.

A soft clatter draws her back into the kitchen, and she looks over at Draco as he spoons tea leaves into the pot.

"Where do you live?" she asks him softly.

He looks over his shoulder at her, "I have a townhome in Hampstead. I moved there after my house arrest."

"Do you like it?"

"Very much," he tells her, pouring the boiling water into the teapot and bringing the service over to the table, sitting down across from her. "It's peaceful and my neighbors are pleasant. The couple next door has been married for fifty-one years, and their grandchildren come by every weekend with their children. My mother likes to visit and help with the gardens."

"How are your parents?"

Draco considers the question, smiling softly to himself. "My mother is well. She's adjusted to life without magic quite seamlessly. I think she likes the occupation and gratification of completing a task with her own hands. She's often in the gardens, not unlike before the war, but now she gets dirt under her nails.

“My father... the transition has been more difficult for him, but not in the way you might expect. I believe he is lonely.” The smile that had taken shape on Draco’s face falls, and he stares at the teapot thoughtfully as he pours them each a cup. “He was involved in everything before the war—not all good, granted. But something about knowing everyone and being in the room fed his enjoyment of life. He has difficulties filling that absence under house arrest.”

“I’ve never thanked them for keeping my designation private all these years.”

Draco smiles again, setting her tea in front of her. “You needn’t. But I should thank you for speaking at their trials. Things could have gone much worse for my family, and you and Potter spared us that.”

Hermione nods and winces as the collar bites into her throat. Draco reaches over and gently grasps her chin, tilting her face up to get a better look at the device. She’d done a number on her neck trying to get it off and she knows the results of her efforts are difficult to look at.

“Where does Potter keep the dittany?” her wizard asks gently.

“It looks worse than it is,” she tells him, looking down to hide the evidence.

“Please,” he pleads, “Let me take care of you, Hermione.”

Meeting his eye, she says, “There should be some in the cupboard there. On the right-hand side.”

Draco goes to the cupboard she indicated and sorts through the various potions and tinctures until he finds essence of dittany. He returns to the breakfast nook, this time kneeling on her side of the table. With practiced precision, he drops some of the oil onto his fingers and gently traces them along the seam of the collar at her throat. Repeating the process until the bruising and claw marks have faded.

She catches his hand as he begins to stand to return the vial. Hermione grabs the cuff of his jumper sleeve and pushes it up his arm to the elbow, revealing his forearm littered with bite marks.

“Leave them,” he tells her gently before she can take the dittany from him.

“But—”

“Do you remember what I said when you first saw them?”

Hermione blinks away tears, meeting his gaze, “They’re the proof that you didn’t hurt me.”

“I’m very proud of these,” he tells her, cradling her face.

Hermione isn’t sure which of them initiates the kiss when their mouths come together. But as soon as Draco’s lips are slotted against hers, the pressure that had been building in her chest eases. She returns his kiss eagerly, drinking in his taste. He holds her tenderly, his thumb swiping against her cheekbone.

Footsteps interrupt them, and they pull apart. Hermione tilts her forehead to rest against Draco's as they wait for whoever approaches. Theodore comes into the kitchen, smiling apologetically when he sees them. "I've just come to tell you, Neville has arrived. We expect Charlie to be here any minute. We're going to stay in the parlor, so you have the run of the house."

"What are you going to tell them?" Hermione asks, suddenly nervous.

"What we need to." Theodore's smile becomes indulgent, and Hermione wants to prickle but cannot. They're doing everything they can to make this easy on her. She trusts them.

His focus jumps to Draco, "Harry thinks it might be best for you to sit in on the conversation."

Draco looks at her, "Would that be alright with you, love?"

With a deep breath, she consents, "Yes, you should be there."

"Okay. If you need me—any of us—"

"I'll be alright," she assures him.

Silver eyes search her for any deception before he presses a kiss to her forehead and leaves after Theodore.

It takes very little time after their departure to creep from the kitchen and locate herself in the hall outside the floo parlor, out of sight but within earshot of the ensuing conversation.

Polite greetings are being exchanged.

There's a knock on the front door, and the voices in the parlor quiet. Hermione turns to look at the tall, dark door at the end of the hall.

"I thought he was coming by floo," Harry says.

He appears from the parlor, glancing at her warmly as he passes to answer the door. Hermione realizes she needs to move or she'll be seen. She begins to backtrack when the tell-tale sound of floo travel comes from the parlor.

Freezing, Hermione looks down the hall at Harry, already pulling the door open.

Theodore appears, "Haz, wait—"

The front door opens, revealing a redhead, though not the one they're expecting.

"Where is she?" the alpha asks.

Hermione sucks in a panicked breath—Ron.

Chapter End Notes

:)) dun dun dun

Chapter 17: Chapter Seventeen

Chapter Summary

Harry's candidates.

Chapter Notes

I felt cruel leaving another cliff hanger after my last one. So double update!

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Wednesday, May 5, 2004 cont...

Blue eyes lock onto Hermione the instant she takes a step in retreat. Seeing her, Ron shoulders past Harry into Grimmauld, stalking forward with terrifying purpose.

Theodore gets between her and the angry alpha. “Back off, Ronald.”

Ron slugs him without breaking stride, eyes flashing back to Hermione. She’s never seen him so furious, so volatile—not even during the war, not even at his worst. Something cold slides down her spine.

“*You*,” he spits.

She stops breathing.

His hands find her biceps, and the world tilts. She’s on her tiptoes before she understands what’s happened, Ron looming over her, his complexion flushed and ugly with something she has no name for. His pheromones hit her like a wall—sharp and bitter and *wrong*, nothing like the safety of her friends, of Draco. It invades her senses like danger, and she answers it with a spike of fear-scent she can’t suppress. Sour pheromones that broadcast exactly how frightened she is to every alpha in the townhome.

“How could you?” His breath is hot on her face, and she recoils as far as his grip will allow. “All this time—we could have been together all this time. Why didn’t you say something?”

Say something. As though she was his to claim. As though she owed him the truth.

Her mind goes very quiet and very small. She focuses on what she can. The weave of his jumper. The cold that still clings to him from outdoors. The particular shade of red climbing

his throat. Hermione catalogues these details with a slow, detached precision, unable to make herself do anything else.

This is Ron. She has known this face since she can remember.

She does not recognize it.

His blue eyes search hers, frenzied, intense. The expression he wears darkens. His grip tightens, and his face dips toward her neck.

“No,” she gasps. The only word she has left. She lets out a pitiful sound.

Then she drops.

Ron is torn away so suddenly that she crumples straight to the floor, sitting hard as the hall erupts around her. Draco has him. She watches, dazed, as he drives Ron into the floorboards with the kind of focused, unrelenting violence that comes not from rage but from something colder and more deliberate.

A series of dull, heavy impacts, and Ron stops fighting back.

Good, some part of her thinks, the part that is still afraid and shaking on the floor. *Good*.

“Mate—enough. Hey. Hey!”

Charlie hauls Draco off his brother, and for a moment, Draco resists.

“Are you hurt?”

She flinches at the voice, looking up into earthy brown eyes. An alpha, large and steady, crouches beside her. “Hermione?”

“Neville.” Her voice comes out smaller than she’d like.

“Did he hurt you?” His gaze drifts briefly to her throat before returning to her face.

She shakes her head, glancing back to look at her unconscious... *what?*

What was Ron now other than an alpha?

Draco’s eyes find hers across the hall. He abandons Ron without a backward glance, dropping to his knees in front of her. She reaches for him instinctively, pressing her palm flat against his chest, feeling the hard, rapid knock of his heart against her hand. He exhales.

“Can you show me your arms, love?”

Hermione complies with Draco’s request, reaching for the hem of her borrowed jumper. As she pulls it over her head, she stills—suddenly aware of where she is and who is watching. Five alphas, all of them focused solely on her. Watching her, tracking her.

Without the jumper, she’s only in her thin pajamas, her arms bare—exposed.

This is all you are, something inside of her says. *This is how they'll always see you. Small. Weak. Helpless.*

Draco's fingers move along her arms with deliberate gentleness, and she focuses on that—just that. Fresh bruises are already rising on her skin.

“Bloody hell,” Charlie says quietly.

Harry catches her eye over Draco's shoulder. He holds her gaze for a moment—something angry and determined in it. Then he crouches beside the unconscious heap that is Ron Weasley. “Charlie. Help me.”

They hoist Ron between them and frogmarch him into the floo parlor.

“Hermione.” Theodore weaves between those remaining, crouching beside her, his lip split and bleeding freely. Her focus snaps to it.

“Your face—”

“I'll be alright, love.” He catches her reaching hands in his. “Up you come.”

Theodore draws her gently to her feet and steers her toward the kitchen. She notices for the first time that she is shaking.

From the floo parlor, someone calls out *The Burrow*, and fire whooshes in the grate.

... ..

The adrenaline is still leaving Draco in increments. He stands, arms crossed and hip against the kitchen counter, watching Theodore settle Hermione onto a stool. His knuckles ache pleasantly, split from where he'd hit Weasley. He doesn't regret it.

Longbottom takes up a position near the window. Neither of them speaks. There is an unspoken agreement between both alphas that the loudest thing either of them could do right now is stay very still.

Theodore murmurs something low and private as he dips his fingers into a small clay pot from the cabinet above the sink—Draco doesn't catch the words, only the tone. Easy. Unhurried. Hermione says nothing, her hands folded in her lap, her eyes focused somewhere in the middle distance between herself and the wall. She hasn't looked at any of them properly since being ushered here from the hall.

Theodore rubs the thick salve smelling of arnica and something herbal onto his fingers, warming it. He takes Hermione's arm with both hands and begins to work the paste into the bruising with his thumbs.

Draco watches her face.

She doesn't flinch, exactly. But something in her goes somewhere else for a moment, and he recognizes it. He'd seen that same absence in the hall when Weasley had her by the arms. Her

eyes had gone strange and fixed. Not subspace, but not present. Occupying time elsewhere in her mind. Frozen. Fawning.

His jaw tightens. He breathes through it.

Theodore says something that makes the corner of her mouth tick upward—not a smile, but almost—and she drops her gaze, watching his hands treating her now. Something loosens fractionally in her shoulders. Draco notes the particular ease with which she allows Theodore to help her—no bracing, no held breath.

Neville shifts his weight by the window, his eyes drifting to Hermione at intervals with a patient, undemanding quality that seems to be native to him. Draco is aware of him the way he's aware of a bird in a tree. His presence in the kitchen doesn't put Draco on guard at all, and he isn't sure whether to feel better or worse about that.

There's a faint whooshing, the floo chimes followed by the clank of the grate. Footsteps in the hall. Potter and the older Weasley turn into the kitchen, and the atmosphere in the room shifts—each alpha taking stock of the others. Draco fights the urge to move closer to Hermione.

Harry's eyes go straight to the witch. He takes her in—the paste, the bruises, the careful way she's holding herself and refusing to meet anyone's gaze. His expression settles into quiet misery. He crosses to Hermione and his bondmate without a word, setting a hand on Nott's shoulder. When neither looks up from the task, Potter asks, "How's your lip?"

Theodore glances up, "When I'm finished."

"I'm alright, Theo," Hermione says stoically, removing her arms from his grip. She stands, reclaiming the jumper from the place it'd been set aside and pulling it over her head, then stills, seeming not to know where to go. Both Potter and Nott look at Hermione appraisingly, and she finally glances up, brown eyes locking on him—not them. She holds the stare for a few moments, then glances around at all the other alphas in the room.

Longbottom remains by the window, casual and observant. Weasley hovers near the doorway, saying nothing, hands in his pockets. He looks like a man serving a sentence.

Good, some part of Draco thinks, with more coldness than he intends.

"Malfoy, put the kettle on, would you?" Harry asks, setting a careful hand on Hermione's shoulder. "Why don't you help, love?"

Hermione takes action immediately.

Draco moves in tandem with his witch, anticipating her needs as she collects tea settings from the cupboards and rummages through the tea leaves to give her hands occupation. He fills the kettle while she opens and closes tins, and sets it to boil as she measures milk into the creamer and counts sugar cubes.

Harry steers Theodore toward the abandoned stool and tips his chin up, inspecting the damage with the focused efficiency of someone who has triaged worse.

“Nothing broken,” he murmurs to his mate, taking some of the salve Theodore used on Hermione and massaging it into his face.

Hermione fiddles with a foil packet.

The kitchen fills with small sounds—Harry’s low remarks, the clink of Hermione’s activity, the occasional returning murmur from Theodore. Draco finds himself an arms’ distance from the witch, watchful and careful. He can still smell the tang of her fear mingled with her familiar metallic scent.

When the kettle boils, he retrieves it and fills the teapot. Hermione stares at the tea service, twisting her fingers together.

“Hermione—”

She turns to the room, voice quiet but clear. “We should... sit down. Can we sit down?”

... ..

The tea has gone cold in her hands. Hermione is aware of this, the way she is aware of most things happening right now—distantly.

She sits at one end of the couch, Theodore beside her and Harry beside him. She’d left distance between herself and Theo. Far enough to be alone. She is aware that the gap between them is unusual enough that he has noticed it. She can see him restraining himself from reaching for her in the way he folds his arms against his chest.

Charlie sits in the armchair nearest the fireplace, Neville occupies the one across from Hermione, and Draco is to her right in the nearest chair. He is watching Harry speak with an expression she can’t read from her periphery. He hasn’t said anything, and she restrains herself from looking at him directly. She’s not sure she could handle sitting in this room if she could see his reactions.

Neville has his hands clasped on his knees—leaning into the conversation. Charlie takes up his armchair with sheer size, his posture open, listening with the particular focused stillness of someone who spends a great deal of time alone.

They are all trying not to look at her too much, which she is grateful for.

Harry has been talking for some time, Theodore adding detail as he sees fit. He covers the essential shape of things first—that Hermione is an omega, *surprise!* That her situation has become legally complicated. That the arrangement they are discussing exists because it was the most protection Harry could negotiate on her behalf. He is clear without being clinical, careful without being vague. She knows all of it and still finds herself listening intently.

“There’s a contract,” Theodore says, giving Harry a pause, “between our house and the ministry.”

Theodore outlines it. The urgency. The supervised visitations—every second day, equal time between candidates. The ministry’s selected candidates—Haworth and Winikus, names she

has been trying not to think about. Their candidacy. The clause preserving her full discretion at the time of her heat, regardless of whether her chosen alpha appears on the contract. He is methodical and unhurried.

“If she doesn’t mate?” Charlie says quietly when Theodore pauses.

“The consequences are significant,” Harry sighs. “For Hermione. For Theo and I both.”

Charlie absorbs this without pressing.

“Why us?” Neville asks. He is looking at Harry.

“Because you’re known to us. Because we trust you. Because we know that if Hermione were to choose either of you, you would treat her well. She would be safe and could be happy. That’s not a guarantee we can make about everyone.”

Something moves in Charlie’s expression that she can’t quite examine without looking at him more directly than she is willing to. He nods once, slowly. She drops her eyes to her cold tea.

“I’m honored,” Neville says, and means it, she thinks. “Thank you.”

“Thank you,” Charlie echoes softly. “I recognize that what’s being asked here is significant, and I don’t want to treat it as anything less than that.”

Neville glances at her briefly, careful and warm, “Nor do I.”

It is a complicated thing, she finds, to be wanted. To sit in a room with two good men who have come here willingly, who are listening carefully and asking thoughtful questions and treating the whole strange weight of this with more grace than she might have expected, and to feel both steadied and frightened by it simultaneously.

She nods. Once. Small. It’s all she can offer them, so she does.

Her collar shifts.

“What about the other two?” Neville asks. “The ministry’s candidates.”

Theodore’s tone is flat in the way that communicates an opinion without stating it. “We know little about them, but we assume the Ministry had ulterior motivations for choosing those they did.”

“And Malfoy,” Charlie says, his tone carefully neutral. “He’s not a candidate alpha.”

“No,” Theodore says.

“Then why is he here?”

The question lands without particular hostility, but it lands. Hermione wants to reach for Draco, to defend him—she knows she should not. She sets the teacup down and clasps her fingers together instead.

“Because he’s still a candidate,” Harry responds simply. “The contract stipulates Hermione retains the right to choose any alpha at the time of her heat, regardless of whether they’re a selected candidate. Draco falls within that provision.”

Both Charlie and Neville look at Draco like alphas do when sizing each other up. Draco looks back with an expression that gives away nothing, his elbow resting on the arm of the chair, two fingers resting against his jaw. His knuckles are split.

“So there are five alphas under consideration,” Neville clarifies.

Theodore nods.

“We’re in competition,” Charlie says. Not accusatory. Just naming it.

“In a manner of speaking.”

Charlie glances at Neville, something passing between them.

Neville turns his attention to his hands. “How does Malfoy know Hermione well enough to be—considered?”

The quality of the silence that follows is deafening. Harry glances at Theodore, who looks at Draco, who stares back resolutely.

Hermione is the one who answers.

“We work together. We have done for some time.” Hermione clears her throat. “When I involuntarily presented at the ministry, I was—detained. The minister forced me into one of the courtrooms with hundreds of alphas and... and...”

When she doesn’t continue, Harry finishes for her. “She was forced to select an alpha as a condition of her release, and she chose Draco.”

The words settle over the room like a draft of cool air. Each wizard readjusts in his seat. She makes an effort not to look at anyone, but she can still see the moment Charlie and Neville arrive at the deeper truth of the explanation. Charlie’s jaw shifts almost imperceptibly. Neville exhales slowly through his nose.

“The minister agreed to honor the arrangement,” Harry says tightly, restraining his feelings on the subject, “He didn’t.”

Neither Charlie nor Neville appears shocked. That is the worst of it, she thinks—that neither is surprised. That the minister breaking his word to an omega is not remarkable, not even surprising enough to raise an eyebrow from two otherwise decent men. It simply is what it is. The world is what it is. She is an omega, and the minister had looked at her in the courtroom and decided his word to her was worth exactly what he believed she was worth. And everyone seems to understand this as a simple fact of the wizarding world.

Charlie says nothing for a long moment. Then, “Right.”

“I see,” Neville tags on, his voice entirely even.

Hermione stares at a loose stitch in her jumper sleeve. Draco sits steadfast at her right hand.

She wonders what it costs him to sit there and say nothing. Now that it's been made clear that they share something. That he has known her undone and vulnerable. That he saw her through her heat, and still, here she is. Unmarked. Unmated. Offering herself to two other alphas.

She is in this room with two good men she barely knows because she has to be, because the ministry has mandated it, because a small and frightening possibility exists that she and Draco might prove incompatible as witch and wizard beyond the undeniable pull between alpha and omega, and she cannot afford to have no one.

But she wants Draco. She wants the time she has already been given with him to mean something. She is afraid of how much she wants it.

Unconsciously, she begins to rub at her throat where it meets the collar.

“The visitation,” Neville says, dragging them back. “Every second day. How does that work?”

“Supervised by the ministry,” Theodore begins. “The terms beyond that haven’t been outlined, which gives us some flexibility. Equal time between candidates. The allotments will fall on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday each week until Hermione’s next heat.”

“All of us together or separately?”

“That’s yet to be determined. The Minister informed us he’d be contacting each of you to arrange the remaining details of visitations.”

“That must be what this is,” Neville reaches into his pocket, producing a letter.

Hermione flinches, and she notices Draco tense as well.

“Give it here,” Harry tells the wizard, taking it and reading it over. “Well, it’s quite vague.”

Charlie tips his head. “And Malfoy—he gets time with Hermione as well? Outside of the visitation?”

“The contract doesn’t mandate it,” Harry says. “But he’s being considered, so yes.”

Charlie nods slowly. She cannot tell what he thinks of this and suspects he is being careful not to show her.

“How long? Until your next heat.” Charlie asks her.

“A month. Perhaps two,” Draco answers for her—his only input to the conversation.

The alphas fall quiet, glancing sidelong at Draco.

“I want to be clear about something,” Harry says, and his voice shifts—still measured, but with an edge underneath. “Hermione is not a resource or a prize to be won. She’s a person first and last. What we’re asking is whether you’re willing to be considered. Whether you’d like the chance to know her.” He pauses. “That’s all this is.”

“At the end,” Neville says, “she chooses.”

“She chooses.”

Neville nods, something settling in his demeanor. Charlie exhales slowly.

“There’s something else,” Theodore says, and his tone shifts just slightly—gentle in the way of someone delivering bad news. “We need to be clear, this isn’t only a legal matter. Hermione cannot remain unmated indefinitely. The biological consequences of an omega without a bond, particularly following a breakthrough heat, become—serious. Her magical core is affected. Her physical health. We are not asking you here simply because the ministry has required it. We are asking because she needs this. Whether she would choose to or not.”

Their expressions turn grim.

The conversation continues. It folds back on itself—practicalities, timelines, the contract language, the logistics of the coming weeks. They both consent to get to know Hermione better, and in the eventuality they decide to remove themselves from candidacy, agree to help protect Hermione until her heat comes. Neville asks carefully considered questions that tell her he is taking this seriously. Charlie asks fewer, but they are equally important. Theodore and Harry answer with the efficiency of people who have prepared for this, who know her. She tracks it all while keeping her gaze on Draco’s shoes.

Somewhere beyond all of it, she thinks about Ron in the hall earlier—his hands on her arms, his breath on her face, and the way her mind had gone quiet and small—and she understands that this distance she has built on the sofa is the same as the silence. She is still in the hall. She has not entirely left it. She can still feel the grip he’d gotten on her.

She thinks about how many people now know what she is, and how that number keeps growing, and how each addition feels like a door opening somewhere behind her that she won’t be able to close again. So many doors behind her. No way to turn around and face them. No way to see what’s coming.

There is a lull in the conversation—a natural breath between topics.

“Hermione,” Theodore chides gently, his hand closing over her wrist. She blinks, realizing she has her fingers hooked into the edge of the collar, the skin rubbed raw from mindless prodding. She has been trying not to think about it, which is an ongoing and spectacular failure because it is so snug around her throat and it presses on her glands every time she breathes, shifts when she swallows—she is so tired of feeling it.

“What is that—around your throat, Hermione?” Neville asks, startling her. She turns her head too quickly, and the collar smarts. The wizard is watching her with a measured expression, attentive in the way he’d been attentive in the alleyway a month ago and in the hall after Ron

attacked her when he'd crouched beside her. He'd probably noticed it then, she realizes. When she'd removed her jumper to show Draco her arms.

"Some sort of shielding?" he asks.

The heat comes up her neck and into her face before she can stop it. She is aware of all of them oriented toward her in the specific attentive way of alphas around an omega, and she is sitting there with her face going red and a cruel and barbaric collar around her throat.

Harry answers before she has to, making no effort to suppress his disgust. "Stipulation two of the contract. Protective garments to be worn while outside of ministry supervision."

"It isn't comfortable for her," Theodore adds darkly.

Her cheeks are hot. She is thinking, with the part of her mind that catalogues things even when the rest of her would prefer it didn't, that this is what the collar is designed to do—to mark her. To make her visible as a thing that has been claimed and regulated and fitted with a band like an animal that might otherwise wander. She is Hermione Jean Granger, she is brilliant, she helped end a war, and she is sitting in her home like a domesticated *pet*.

Charlie has gone very still.

She swallows and feels the pressure of it.

From the corner of her vision, she is aware of Draco. His jaw has tightened—she can see it in her periphery, the slight shift of muscle, the controlled stillness of someone holding something in place. He does not speak. But she knows what the tightness of his jaw means now, has learned the vocabulary of his restraint over the past week, and the knowing of it does something complicated in her chest that she doesn't have the room to examine right now.

To her left, she feels Harry shift and look at Theodore. Whatever passes between them is silent and brief.

Unable to sit there any longer, she suddenly speaks, "I'm—going to go lie down." She looks at the tea service rather than the room when she pushes up from the sofa. "Please don't stop on my account—there's more to discuss. I just—"

She stops, making herself look up briefly—at Charlie, and then at Neville. There is something she should say. Some acknowledgement of the conversation, of the wizards who had come here today and sat in the parlor and listened carefully and not once made her feel—

"Thank you. For coming. For—considering this."

Despite needing to, she does not look at Draco as she goes.

Sooooooooooooo?

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